

Kit Reed: On the Penal Colony

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*Kit Reed's most recent book is a story collection entitled **Weird Women, Wired Women**, and a new thriller under her "Kit Craig" pseudonym, **Some Safe Place**, is scheduled for publication in England later this year. She lives in Connecticut and travels widely; it was presumably during her American travels that she hit upon this puritanical notion for prison reform. Perhaps you'll bear it in mind during your summer vacation...*

On the Penal Colony

By Kit Reed

*Notebook found in candy bin
General Store,
Old Arkham Village, Arkham, Mass.*

FRIEND, IF YOU ARE READING this, I am already dead. I, Arch Plummer, am giving this notebook to Hester Phyle with instructions to burn it as soon as she knows

Gemma and I and our friend are safe. The truth must out. Unspeakable secrets fester here. Atrocities. If the three of us don't make it, Hester knows what to do. The horror must be exposed!

If we make it, Gemma and Laramie and I will hold a press conference and blow the lid off this place. If we don't, Hester has promised to leave this where you will find it. Whoever you are, the future depends on you.

If you pulled this out of the barrel in the General Store instead of Olde ArkhamTM) candy corn or packaged pemmican or arrowheads or that cornhusk doll your daughter wanted, then Gemma and Laramie and I are already dead. I beg you. Call *The Times* and *Hard Copy* now. Leave no

stone unturned. Contact the network anchors whether or not they can pronounce the language. Bring *The National Inquirer*.

"And on your right note the authentic 18th-century architecture. Every house in Old Arkham Village is more than two hundred years old! Now count the windowpanes. Every window is 12 over 12."

"Mom, can we leave now?"

"Quit hitting your brother!"

"I want to watch TV."

"...paints made from natural substances. Blueberries. Buttermilk. Now, the village tavern. Our colonists will be happy to answer any questions you have."

"Harry, that one is smiling at me."

"It's his job. Don't get too close." Dad lights a match and winks.

"Watch this."

The "colonist" rips off the flaming wig. "Eeeowwww!"

You come for the day and you say "Ohhh, quaint." You have no idea what's really happening just below the surface in our idyllic colonial village, deep in the Massachusetts hills. Underneath the mobcaps. Underneath the Earth. You're malled out so you bring the kids, drop your candy papers and Zip-loc sandwich bags, deface the property, take your snapshots and go. You cart in foreign guests to impress them with your nation's heritage — 18th-century houses and shops; oh, wow, these things are *old*! Or you bring Gran because she is old.

Or something shakes loose inside you and starts rattling around. You get hungry for your past. Not necessarily your past. A past. Any past. Some commercial visionary resurrected all these old buildings and moved them here to supply an early American past for all of you late Americans to enjoy even though you never had one. At twenty bucks a pop, it's your past too.

So you pack up the kids and throw grinders and a sixpack of brewskis into the cooler and come rolling our way as if this is some kind of Colonial mecca, God's own solution to two problems: crime and rootlessness. Well I can't tell you about rootlessness — who cares whether your great-greats hit Plymouth Rock or Ellis Island or rolled in hanging from the axle of a truck? But I can tell you a thing or two about crime.

"...scheme for a model prison." Bullfinch Warden hocks; the sound is heard clear to the back of the tram. "As our country's leading penologists you can see what we have accomplished here. Forget license plates. Forget telemarketing and Readers' Clearing House as revenue-producing activities for prisoners who turn back the proceeds to the state. We are at the apex here. The prison of the future. Convicts as capital."

Crime? You want to see crime? This place is a crime. Maggoty food and floggings in the picturesque village square, torture so deep that you never hear the screams. Murderous trusties, sadistic screws. But what do you know anyway, you stuff home-made gingerbread into the kids and buy them the thirteen-star flag and you lead them onto the scaled-down replica of the *Bonhomme Richard* and you go, "Oh, wow, these are my people."

You trudge through the landlocked whaler, humming to the canned gabble on the Auditron, and no matter where you came from, you're all, like, *these are our forefathers*. You get to feeling all-American even if you just landed on a raft. Correction. Early American; you ride Paul Bunyan's blue ox and you bong your knuckles on the genuine authentic half-sized Liberty Bell and if the screws aren't looking maybe you try to scratch in your initials, but only a little bit, and you feel as American as hell.

And, wuoow, you think, what a cool solution to America's problems. Punishment and restitution, all in one place! Symbiosis. Patriotism and profit. Plus rehabilitation, us hard-timers in tricorns or aprons and mobcaps answering your stupid questions about beef jerky and square-headed nails. And we are so fucking polite! You push a button and the National Anthem plays and the replicated flag goes up over the to-scale replica of Fort McHenry. Your heart swells up like the Barney balloon in the Macy's Day parade and you're like, America, wow!

"Note the presentation. It's based on a revolutionary new concept. It's not what you're doing, it's what it looks like you're doing that shapes society. Hence the ideal village. Happy villagers."

Happy! What do you care about us? What do you know?

You see us sweating in our period costumes and you think, fine. Hardened criminals working their way back into the fabric of American life. How heartwarming. When they get out they'll be all-American, yes!

"I don't know, I turned the other way and the prisoner just..." The guard produces two bloody ears.

"Shut up, they'll hear you."

"But Warden, what are we going to do!"

"Shut up. The state examiners!" Bullfinch Warden snarls, "Get him out of here."

"He's so deep in solitary that..."

"Not the perp. The tourist who got hurt. We can't have this getting out."

You think we look charming. If you think about us at all. Hester lays out bayberry candles and you get all mushy: I love America. Delightful. You note the glint in the 12-over-12s that us hard-timers clean every day at dawn and you get all proud. American ingenuity. Quaint.

Well, you don't have a clue. See, you can watch us cobble or pot until you get bored and then you can buy your barley sugar sticks and take the Ethan Frome or Hester Prynne shuttle back to the Molly Pitcher or the Crispus Attucks Parking Lot and get in your RVs and go. We stay.

I could tell you about charming. I could show you the underside of cute. Old Arkham Village is our nation's heritage all right, but it's not what you think. Rehabilitation, sure: let cons do time in pretty-pretty early America. Whittle by the fireplace with the mantel painted in authentic imitation cranberry-and-buttermilk paint, except we can't have knives. Press criminals through the all-American grid. They come out the other side like potatoes, mashed. Homogenized. You can mold them into anything you want. It's America all right, America straight out of Lizzie Borden by Simon Legree. We, your model prisoners, live by the numbers. Bullfinch Warden has thumbscrews and a gift for hurting people so the marks don't show. Then there are the trusties with their Red Devils and their cattle prods. And at night, stalking the catwalks in our dormitory hundreds of feet below Betsy Ross Lot 3, the screws.

"Honey, let's fuck here."

"Eeek, what would our forefathers think?"

"Our forefathers are off duty. The place is closed."

The tourists are lying together on the greensward. A noise comes out of the ground like a great, communal groan. She leaps out of her lover's arms with a shriek. "Ernie, somebody's listening, let's get out of here!"

I AM WRITING in my own blood, by what light sifts through the bars in the subterranean part of Old Arkham Village that you never see. This is our home nights until dawn, Thanksgiving and Christmas, when even public parks in the State of Massachusetts close.

And if we look all right to you in the daytime, bowing and smiling, answering your questions in 18th-century quaint — well. You don't see the hidden monitors, trusties ready to rat if the smile slips even a half inch. Sonic barriers at the perimeters and electrified razor wire in the woods. The anklets and the belt.

I'll come to the belt.

Meanwhile, my credentials. To prove that this is no political tract and definitely not a gag. It isn't even a cry for help.

It's a record of how things are. What it's like in this tarted-up, chintzy, early American penal colony, me to you. I, Arch Plummer, am a lifer here in Old Arkham Village; for years I have been your friendly village blacksmith, answering your stupid questions as I hammer horseshoes and craft cheesy rings for your kids out of genuine, authentic replicas of 18th-century square-headed nails. You've seen me pull glowing metal out of the forge and bong horseshoes into shape to the voice of Jason Robards reading, "Under the spreading chestnut tree..." *The Village Blacksmith*, piped in here on a loop, and you've seen me hammer them on to the Percherons' hooves and finish them off with the hasp while on the same loop some old mid-American broad named Jo Stafford belts out "The Blacksmith Blues." Well I could tell you a thing or two about blacksmith blues.

Right, I am the village smithy. For my crimes. If you knew how many times I've heard that track or what would happen to me if I trashed the speakers or tried to walk away from the racket, you'd understand. Burn

scars on my ankles where the anklets zapped me; mossy cracks in my skull from the beatings in solitary and beginning marks around my waist from the belt. I am a lifer.

A life sentence to Old Arkham Village, when all I did was steal a loaf of bread.

Okay, okay, it was a Lexus, but I didn't know about the toddler in the back until we reached Cuernavaca, by which time the only logical thing to do was send the ransom note. I never laid a finger on him! I bought him the Pancho Villa serape and matching Mexican hat and put him on the bus home before I even mailed the note. And here I am with the hard-timers. Quiven the decoy duck carver (murder One), and Roland the town printer (arson). Gemma the gingerbread maker (crime of passion, don't ask; her husband was *shtupping* her mom), sweet Gemma, whom I happen to be in love with — and Laramie the cobbler (armed robbery, which I happen to know was a frame).

"It is well known that society's dregs are recidivists beyond all hope of rehabilitation." The warden fills the 18th-century meetinghouse, roaring like a frustrated warthog, and thirty visiting penologists flinch. "If we are going to warehouse them, let's do it creatively. There is no enterprise without its profit."

If you find this. When you read this. Know this. Everything I've done I did for Joanna. And Quiven. Because of what happened to them when the only wrong thing they did was fall in love.

See, when the screws turn us out of the rack and march the work details out four hours before Old Arkham Village opens, nobody cares who walks next to who in the double line. Hard-timers, all of us, groggy from the pills, belching oatmeal and miserable in our pointed shoes and scratchy linsey woolsey period costumes, shambling like the dead.

The screws are zoned out on these grim mornings; hung over from the orgy and bitter about being stuck on the predawn shift. Nobody notices if you're marching with guys from your tier or sidling closer to the women in the foggy dawn, and if you do collide with her — Oh, Gemma...if Quiven collides with Joanna! — if you mutter to each other under cover of the guards' shouting and get to know each other, everybody thinks what

you to say to each other leads to zilch. The vise of a maximum security prison is too tight for love.

But Quiven got close to Joanna and fell in love anyway.

"Mommy, that lady doesn't like me."

"Of course she does, dear. It's her job."

"Then why is she crying?"

"Shut up. Shut up and eat your horehound drops."

I DIDN'T EVEN SEE IT happening; I was conditioned to march on, like Pavlov's dogs or the chicken that dances on the electrified turntable, softshoe like crazy to keep from getting shocked. Want to break and run? Want to kill and burn? Light some weed or relieve yourself behind a tree? Forget it. We look free to you, but we are not. Hidden by the costumes, there are the anklets, with an extra added incentive for us. Under the shirts and leather jerkins, we wear the belts.

Electronic control. Now and ever. Day and night. We prisoners are reined in tight. We eat rotten meat and weevily bread and belch misery and resentment; we crawl out of boxes on these dank mornings and break rocks before we don our costumes for the Early American Card Shoppe or tickety-boo little Scrimshaw Junction, folding our hands underneath leather aprons and putting on prim Colonial smiles. But what do you tourists care?

We look all right to you.

"And to keep order we give them the illusion of rehabilitation. That they are learning new careers. Movement is not action, but we make them think it is. A true belief in movement can prevent action," Bullfinch Warden says.

Appearances. Happy colonists. Model prisoners. If you look at all, you don't see past the costumes and bland faces, but there is rage scorching the sweaty gauze under our wigs and murder in our hearts. Be careful what you do when you come into our shops and houses, be careful what you say! Rebellion etches the insides of our bellies; pry open our jaws and you'll see

fire. We mean to destroy Bullfinch Warden, but you happen to be closer. Beware. We could just rip a hole in your face.

Some days one of us forgets himself and strikes out or makes a break for it, but it never lasts long: the belts. The monitors. The drugs. No sleep. Debilitating food.

By the time you come at ten A.M. we're so deep into it that we look right at home in the confected past. And if Quiven and Joanna fall in love and begin to plan, I don't guess it, so how could you? I am in love with Gemma, but it's only since the *auto da fe*.

Quiven was in love with Joanna. He couldn't leave it alone. Notes dropped in with the laundry, sweet Gemma slipped Joanna's notes into the pockets of his fatigues for her, and in the men's supply room Laramie Beckam did the same for Quiven. Quiven and Joanna had seconds to cherish and devour each other's notes; the screws turn out the beds and check the toilets on the hour. Their love fed on messages in the code desperate prisoners send, endearments tapped out on prison pipes. They kept in touch! Love grew on the most insubstantial communication — veiled looks, endearments murmured in line; one day I saw Quiven and Joanna lock fingers. I whispered, "Careful. You'll get hurt!" but a trusty heard me and instead of working at the smithy I logged the twelve hours until the park closed with my head and hands clamped in the village stocks. I tried to warn him!

"But let's face it, ladies and gentlemen. These people are animals. We are a warehouse here. Good penology is optimizing it."

Quiven knew it would kill them both but he was in love. Still, love might have died of starvation if Bullfinch Warden hadn't caught Joanna dreaming over her spinning wheel: a complaint. Family of Latvians, in the hand-worked shirts and aprons with the lambs embroidered on the front. When lovesick Joanna was too distracted to answer their hundred questions they went to the warden for a refund. Mind you they thought he was the historic curator. Yeah, right. "We come so far. She look asleep!" They claimed the hostess in Cotton Mather house was not only dumb, but deaf.

The next day Joanna was ashen and drawn. Bullfinch Warden had

activated her anklets. Not bigtime torture, just enough voltage to keep her on her toes. Safe. But seeing Joanna suffer drove Quiven nuts. It was around then that we had the Indian corn pudding riot, with Quiven standing up on the table in the dining hall and us chanting and banging our cups until they zapped all the anklets and belts and we fell out senseless from the pain. When we came to, Quiven was in solitary and we were under lockdown on short rations, bread and water and fried pork rinds, don't ask.

It wasn't bad food that drove Quiven. It was compression. When he cleared solitary he was assigned to the Old Stone Jail. Then he heard Joanna scream. Fury drove him to crack the leg irons and wrench off the cell door. Compression sent him out of the jail and across the Village Green to Cotton Mather House. He went in spite of the fact that the belt's secret workings intensified as he got farther from his designated post.

Quiven was in agony by the time he reached Cotton Mather house. Screaming Joanna was bent backward over her spinning wheel by a sex-crazed tourist in a FUCK ME I'M AMERICAN T-shirt and an International Harvester cap. In spite of the teeth of pain Quiven pulled her away from the horrified tourists and took her upstairs. Security programming sent a couple of jolts into her anklets to keep her in place but love overrode the pain.

"Oh, Quiven," she said, or so Gemma reports.

Quiven looked at her with his own death written in his face. "I love you." They both knew that this was not only the first time for them, it would be the last time.

It was excruciating, but they didn't care. The anklets wouldn't kill her, only scar her, and when push comes to shove in prison, it is the moment you strive for, not the terrible aftermath or punishments to come.

So Quiven and Joanna locked themselves into a bedroom where they murmured and touched for as long as they could manage until the gnawing scorpions in the belt overrode even Quiven's compressed love and grief and he fell out of himself, never to return.

"Because of its nature, a democracy is obligated to pretend to rehabilitate. To work, rehabilitation has to be voluntary. Since it is

mandatory it never works. Therefore, the state's only obligation is to make it look as if we have tried."

By the time Bullfinch's cadre in their Revolutionary war uniforms broke in on them, pain ruled. Quiven was dead. And Joanna? Joanna had gone so far back inside herself that not all the thorazine in the world could retrieve her. She was lost to us.

No deed goes unpunished and nothing in prison passes without note. Bullfinch took off the belt and strung Quiven's body up in the underground cellblock. He made us file by to see the exact cost of rebellion. They hung him upside down, so we walked by cranksided with our heads resting on our shoulders so we could see into his face.

"Sometimes you can only teach by example. That's why the state gives us the death penalty. Sometimes the example itself is more powerful than the threat of death."

Bullfinch Warden actually said, "Look on my works, ye mighty."

And we saw. Incised around Quiven's naked waist by the constant jackhammering of a million tiny needles was the warning: LOVE IS DEATH... FREEDOM IS SUICIDE... FREEDOM IS SUICIDE... LOVE IS DEATH, words chasing each other around and around dead Quiven's waist, a warning to us all etched in pain, and if the needles penetrated Quiven's vitals, it's a testimony to physical strength and to the power of his love that he had his moment with Joanna before his heart faltered and he died.

In case you're interested, Warden Bullfinch wasn't about to leave it at that.

He stood up on the catwalk while we filed past what was left of Quiven and he made a speech. I'll spare you the details. It was worse than the anklets and the belts, and the punchline? Instead of sending Joanna to Quincy for retrial, Bullfinch Warden was conducting a witchcraft trial, a special event for the Labor Day Weekend visitors to Old Arkham Village, us on time-and-a-half rations since prisoners are never paid, and the state makes overtime provisions when they need you around the clock. The trial was slated to take place in front of high-ticket audiences at special

evening showings so we could continue with business as usual during the day.

"The lessons we teach here are for the ages. They are lessons for us all."

But what do you care? You loved the trial. It went live on CNN. *Hard Copy* came in on it, along with *Inside Edition*, and Ted Koppel interviewed William F. Buckley Junior on the witch hunts of the 1950s in a special *Nightline* telecast direct from here.

Because you thought it was contrived just for your entertainment, you even loved the *auto da fe*. It's a good thing Joanna was already catatonic, she didn't feel a thing. At least we don't think she did, although *Entertainment Tonight* reported agents from William Morris and CAA were trying to sign her up on the basis of her performance, up to and including her dying screams.

And because you were excited and distracted by how real the flames looked and how eloquently Joanna writhed, and because the screws were busy keeping you from mobbing the stake, Gemma's body and mine touched in the crush: "Arch." "Gemma!" We fused, bonded by instant love. And as reflected flames licked our faces and we moaned in the heat, my friend Laramie Beckam, who knows every duct and pipe in the bowels of our underground cellblock because he is a trusty, Laramie fell in with us and we hatched the plan.

"The only effective facility is the maximum security facility. It has to look civil from the outside, but it must shut off all possibilities of escape."

Now our plan is complete. We've assembled civilian wardrobes and kited them over the electronic barrier. After I plant this note I give the signal. Laramie starts the fire in the paint locker. By the time it's extinguished he's shorted out the E-barrier and we're out of here. And if we don't make it, if they see us escaping in spite of the fire and confusion, if they shoot us dead, no matter. It's better than one more day in the smithy, with Gemma suffering behind the Visitors' Center desk or giving

her monologue on Colonial spinning in the repaired and refurbished Cotton Mather house.

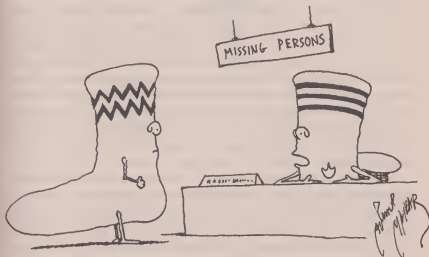
"Effective prevention is predicated on the impossibility of escape."

Quiet. You don't hear me. If our plan works, you will never read this. Instead you'll see me on all 1,000 Primestar channels, telling our story to the world. All that remains is to slip this account into my jerkin and, when the shift changes and the screws march us, the early detail, to the holding pen to draw breath before they put us back into the Colonial petting zoo, I'm going to slip away. I'll stick this notebook into the cornhusk doll barrel in the Bayberry Candle corner of the General Store. Although Hester is afraid to come with us, she's volunteered to risk her life if necessary to preserve this testament. At my signal that we're home free, she'll destroy it for our own protection as well as hers.

Live free or die.

We go tonight. ॐ

— with thanks to Paul Mercer



"Do you have any idea how many dryer related cases we get around here?"

Those of you who have suffered this year from a lack of Esther Friesner's fiction can relax at last. This new story has us wondering whether Ms. F might be related to the late cartoonist Charles Addams. Most likely not, but it's obvious that she knows her way around Addams's territory (and what's more, unlike the male half of our species, if she got lost she wouldn't hesitate to ask for directions, either).

Chestnut Street

By Esther M. Friesner

THE WEATHER WAS remarkably warm for November; everyone on Chestnut Street said so. It didn't matter that it was only

the first of the month. Hopes for a mild autumn could be turned into pipedreams promising a mild winter to follow. (This despite the fact that years and years of past experience should have taught the most optimistic resident that the only thing less predictable than Massachusetts weather was the policy of the Planning and Zoning Commission.) No matter: Wishful thinking carried weight on Chestnut Street.

Mr. Budd was raking up the dead leaves in his front yard and enjoying the sunshine when the yellow cab came driving slowly down the street. A cab on Chestnut Street was as rare a sighting as a unicorn or a Martian or a Democrat. This was Boston suburbia: Either you had a car for every family member over the age of sixteen or you had family rows about it that the neighbors could hear. That would never do, *ergo* you got the cars. So long as there was a façade to be shored up and neighborly opinion to be feared, who needed cabs?

Mr. Budd leaned his pudgy hand on the butt-end of his rake, then rested his equally pudgy chin atop it. "I wonder who that's come for!" he asked the air. He decided that now was as good a time as any to take a break from his chore and settled down for some leisurely snooping.

Across the street from the Budds' chocolate brown pseudo-Colonial stood an identical sage green model, the Starrett place. Chestnut Street was a cul-de-sac kingdom designed and built by a developer who produced houses on the same limited-options principle that Burger King applied to, yes, burgers: Offer the buyer control over some minor cosmetic aspects of the project — exterior paint-job, single or double front door, hold the pickle, hold the lattice — and he went away convinced he'd just built his dream house (Ayn Rand, thou shouldst be living at this hour!).

In her front yard, Mrs. Valerie Starrett was heading her mums with the grim, dutiful air of her Puritan ancestors at the hangings of the Salem Village witches. As she decapitated each spent flower she shook her head over it dolorously, as if her gardening shears were the fiery sword of Eden's guardian angel, wielded more in sorrow than in anger. She too paused in her day's occupation to consider the oncoming cab.

Oncoming was a generous evaluation. *Oncrawling* would have been more accurate, had it been a word to begin with. The vehicle couldn't have been going more than five miles per hour. Part of Mrs. Starrett's spirit approved mightily — she was seventy-two, and in her opinion time zipped by fast enough without automobiles trying to do the same. Another part deplored the fact that such pokiness probably meant the driver was lost. In her opinion, a cab that had any business being on Chestnut Street in the first place should know where it was going and go there with all due celerity. Cruising cars were the hallmark of burglars, "casing the joint" as the late Mr. Starrett would say. (He had been addicted to old detective movies and had even worn a trenchcoat for a while until Mrs. Starrett put a stop to *that* nonsense.)

The cab cared nothing for the hound-like, prying gaze of Mr. Budd or the pursed lips of Mrs. Starrett. It continued to inch its way down Chestnut Street until it came to a stop in front of #34, which was the Gaye house. The right rear door opened and a skeleton got out.

You could tell it was a real skeleton. Even the Kittredges, who lived across the street from the Gayes and didn't have a cataract-free eye

between them, could see that much. The Gaye house, blue with white trim, was fronted by a fieldstone fence, all dark gray stones. There were also several outsize garbage bags leaning against the outer face of the stone wall, leftovers from Halloween — the decorative black sort that looked like wickedly grinning bats when you stuffed them with leaves or old newspapers, and the orange kind that looked like giant jack o' lanterns. The skeleton was white, and the blue, gray, black and orange background made it stand out so that there was no way you could identify it as anything but what it was.

There wasn't an ounce of flesh on it, nor any scrap of winding sheet. It wore neither deeply cowed black monk's habit nor bowtie nor bikini. It stood in the street, skull turning slowly to left and to right, one bony hand still poised on the open taxi door. The empty eye-sockets rested for a heartbeat on the Kittredges.

They saw that all right, too. Mrs. Kittredge's scream was loud enough to make the houses all up and down Chestnut Street yield up their living in much the same way as the sea is advertised to yield up its dead come Judgment Day. To borrow a phrase, some came running. To coin another, some got one good gander at the biding bones and *kept* running until they were well past the skeleton and all the way down to the far end of the street, where the cul-de-sac gave on Linden Way, which was a thoroughfare.

Mostly, though, the people stood in their own front yards and goggled.

Somebody said "Holy shit!" Somebody else said "Whoa!" Both of these local commentators were Denny and Sam, the teenaged sons of the McGraw household, widely suspected among the older residents of Chestnut Street of being a bad influence on their younger brother Matthew, his mother's mid-life crisis baby, a tender tad of only seven summers.

Miss Talmadge, who had the yellow house with her cousin, Miss Pennington, began to say the Lord's Prayer until the sound of those words seemed to draw the skeleton's attention. One good, steady once-over from those lightless sockets and Miss Talmadge shut up fast.

A little time passed. Mothers of small children began to fidget on their front steps. It was a Tuesday and their watches told them it was five after three. The school bus would be turning onto Chestnut Street at twenty

past, just the way it did every weekday, barring breakdowns. What would the children think? How would they react? Every mother's heart chilled at the thought of hysterically shrieking little ones, mentally scarred for life by sight of the grisly visitor.

Every mother's inner imp whispered that a more likely scenario was the kids deciding *en masse* that the skeleton was A: A cinematic special effect; B: Way cool; C: Late. Halloween was *yesterday*.

The unpredictable reactions of children aside, there were more practical matters to consider: The cab was blocking the road. The school bus would never be able to get past it to make its roundabout turn in the circle at the end of Chestnut Street.

Mrs. Corinne Halpern had one of the houses on the circle and a little girl in third grade. She never even allowed Emily to watch the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers for fear of nightmares, so she was definitely opposed to the child seeing this ambulatory boneyard. She took a deep breath, anchored her upper teeth to her lower lip—the better to strengthen her resolve—and marched right up to the driver's side of the cab.

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to—" she began. And that was all she did. She never finished. There was no driver, though a set of assorted keys was lodged firmly in the ignition, with a red-dyed rabbit's-foot dangling from the chain. On the dashboard was one of those crown-shaped air fresheners (which Miss Pennington thought looked darling, but which Miss Talmadge had flatly banned from their Buick sedan, insisting that the item was the trademark of the Latin Kings and was death or worse for anyone not of the gang to display). On the seat was a beaded wooden cover supposed to grant the driver relief from backache and buttnumb. The rest was silence.

Mrs. Halpern gave a little mew of distress over her discovery and dashed back into her house, slamming the door behind her. Emily would have to grow up *some day*.

For some reason, Mrs. Halpern's aborted sally into heroism became the galvanic inspiration for her neighbors. Mr. Budd laid down his rake, Mrs. Starrett set aside her shears and struggled up from her knees from her place among the mums, the Kittredges linked hands more adamantly than they had that long-ago evening when they had gone to tell her father that yes they *were* getting married *now*. All up and down Chestnut Street, the

forces of neighborhood solidarity converged on the skeleton and the cab. Several people brought out their cellular phones with 911 keyed into the autodial, just in case.

They formed a sort of human amoeba around the interloper, leaving a nice big breathing space between themselves and the bones. The skeleton surveyed the crowd first from left to right, then right to left. It took a few steps forward, away from the cab. Its feet clinked and scraped on the pavement like windchimes still stuck in the shipping box. Those people most directly in its path took a corresponding number of steps backwards. The skeleton stood still, arms at its sides, waiting.

"I wonder what it wants?" Mr. Budd said out loud. He was the neighborhood's lowest common denominator, an excellent source if you wanted to hear the obvious stated While-U-Wait.

"Who it wants, more likely," Mrs. Starrett rumbled darkly. "I always knew my time would come, but I never thought it would come in a yellow cab."

"I don't think — I don't think it's who — *what* you think it is," said Miss Talmadge, who had read all of Emily Dickinson with no discernible signs of self-improvement. "I mean, wouldn't it have a scythe or — or at least a sickle?"

"Should I go back in the house and bring out the chess set?" Denny asked Sam. (Denny went to movies. *Lots* of movies. Even the foreign ones where you had to read stuff across the bottom of the screen.)

"Badminton," Sam corrected. "Or maybe Twister. Yeah, that's it, Twister!" (Sam went to lots of movies too; silly ones, no reading required.)

In all this time, no one had opened the door of the Gaye house. They were at home — you could tell because both cars were in the driveway. Mr. Gaye worked from his home office. Mrs. Gaye took care of their only child, an infant. Half of the neighborhood couldn't tell you whether it was a boy or a girl. They had seen Mrs. Gaye come home from the hospital two months ago with something wrapped in a yellow blanket, and that was the last they'd seen of mother or child. Mr. Gaye did the shopping. If Mrs. Gaye ever took the baby out for an airing, it must have been at night.

And that was when it all came clear to Mrs. Starrett. "It's not here as Death," she declared to the populace. "It's here as Justice!"

Most of the people near her responded with one voice: "Huh?"

"Oh, I see, I get it, I understand what she's saying." Mr. Budd bobbed his balding head, sending small semaphoring flashlets of light off into the air from his black-rimmed glasses. "Skeleton in the closet, yeah, that's it. Only it's come out of the closet, knocking at the door, chickens come home to roost, sure, I know."

The meatless chicken in question cocked its skull to one side (truly a less than winsome mannerism when performed without benefit of epidermis) and regarded Mr. Budd in an inquiring manner. Those persons standing nearest the apparition found themselves automatically mimicking the gesture, until the neighbors standing opposite them felt the urge to adjust the horizontal *and* the vertical hold knobs on life.

But if the skeleton gave every indication of wanting to hear Mr. Budd's theory expounded at length, the flesh-bearing bones all around it needed no further footnotes. They saw, they got it, they understood as well. A wisp of a whisper passed through the crowd, waxed fat, multiplied itself, and populated Chestnut Street after its own kind.

" — killed the baby! I always said there wasn't anything right about those people from the minute they moved into this neighborhood!"

" — adopted. Illegally! They bought that child on the black market and — "

" — knows that child is as black as the ace of spades! She used to teach in Roxbury, you know, and she was up to no — "

" — his girlfriend's bastard, which he forced his wife to accept! And girlfriend's the word, because if that little slut was older than sixteen, I'm a — "

The racket rose. The skeleton stood in the midst of it, an islet of calceate calm. For the most part, the neighbors continued to bat about various speculations as to the specific sin which had brought this clattersome caller to the threshold of *chez* Gaye, although Denny and Sam McGraw spent their breath in a slowly heating argument as to whether the skeleton belonged to a man or a woman. Denny claimed you could tell from the pelvis, but he had forgotten exactly *how* you could tell (in much the same way that far too many people refuse to recall whether it's "Wine before beer, never fear" or "Beer before wine, everything fine," *pace* Robert Benchley.). Then Sam made a whole string of very bad and

relatively smutty puns about pelvises and there went *that* stab at amateur forensics.

It was at the very moment that Mr. Budd was holding forth as to the extremely snippy way Mr. Gaye had treated him while hustling the little missus to the hospital (" — just asking if the baby was planned or, you know, one of God's blessed little accidents, being neighborly, and he doesn't do more than snarl about what a *hurry* they're in and — ") and Denny was trying to get Sam's mind and mouth out of the gutter through Twelve-Step Noogie Therapy that the door of the Gaye house opened. Mrs. Gaye stepped out. She was holding a baby in her arms. A live baby. A white baby (well, rosy peach, to be precise). A cheerful, plump and squirmy baby in possession of its father's eyes, hair, and nose, and its mother's complexion, chin, and mouth.

Mrs. Gaye's mouth. Quite a mouth, there. Especially when Mrs. Gaye's ears scooped up the last few comments and speculations from the neighbors' overactive tongues. The things that woman said! The names she called them! (Well, how were *they* supposed to know she'd been visiting a sick sister with the infant? Chestnut Street harbored no Nosy Parkers, nosirree-bob ma'am!) It was a darn good thing that the baby was too young to repeat any of it, or the child would have wound up attending nursery school with a bar of Ivory soap permanently lodged in its mouth.

Mr. Gaye emerged from the house, drawn by the sound of his wife's tirade. He looked half-asleep — a normal condition for fathers of young infants — and half-shaven, but fully alert to the possibility of his helpmeet going into core meltdown right in the middle of Chestnut Street. He laid one hand on her shoulder, divested her of the baby, and asked what was wrong.

She told him.

Mr. Gaye listened and nodded, then walked down his front steps, the baby still on one shoulder. He walked through the front yard, out the gap in the stone wall fence, and right up to the skeleton. As for the bones, they remained motionless and silent. If some cosmic force had sent them to #34 to embody Justice, said cosmic force had some change coming.

"Did my agent send you?" Mr. Gaye inquired.

The skeleton was mute on that subject.

"Guess not," Mr. Gaye murmured. "Should've listened, everyone misses a deadline now and then. Oh well. Never mind." He started back toward the house, but paused and turned before he reached the stone wall. "Is there anything I can do to help you?" he called to the skeleton.

A loud snort from his wife overrode any reply the bones might have given. She strode down the steps, over the jolly greensward, past her husband and offspring, and past the skeleton as well. Her goal, like that of Mrs. Halpern before her, was the cab. Unlike Mrs. Halpern, she was neither cowed nor quailed by the sight of a driver's seat *sans* driver. She didn't give a frilled fig for what wasn't there; she was only concerned with what was. Or what should be. She was practical, was Mrs. Gaye, in all matters save the one long-ago bout of March Hare madness that had allowed her to marry a writer.

Something stuck out from under the front seat on the passenger's side. Mrs. Gaye yanked open the cab door and made a swan dive for it. She stood up brandishing a clipboard in a nice recreation of Perseus with the Head of Medusa.

"Thirty-four Chestnut Place, goddamit!" she hollered at the skeleton. She then flung the clipboard back into the cab, slammed the door, strode back into her house and slammed *that* door for good measure.

Silence took out a rent-to-own lease on Chestnut Street.

Still holding the baby, Mr. Gaye shrugged. It might have been intended as an expressive shrug, but if so it badly wanted the attentions of an editor. The baby cooed and gurgled, then spit up on Daddy's shoulder just to reestablish who was who and what was what. Mr. Gaye grinned sheepishly at the neighbors. "Heh," was all he had to say before he too went home. It wasn't much of an expository passage, but since this was one occasion where he wasn't being paid by the word, who could blame him?

The bare bones seemed to take their cue from Mr. Gaye's retreat, for while the neighbors thrummed and mumbled amongst themselves, the skeleton eased itself back into the cab and closed the door after it.

The cab glided away up Chestnut Street just as the school bus came barreling down. The cab drove straight and true up the very middle of the street, avoiding favoritism in the matter of traffic lanes. The school bus hewed to the right, but Chestnut Street was narrow and there was still a

significant measure of PVO (Potential Vehicular Overlap). However, at the point where all present held their breath in horror, the cab slid itself softly through the school bus at the point of supposed impact and came out the other side as easily as a needle passing through Jell-O™.

The bus stopped at its wonted dropoff points and the debarking schoolchildren spilled out, making loud the welkin ring on Chestnut Street (The Planning and Zoning Commission had approved limited daylight welkin-ringing for this area). If they noted an air of fear or anxiety or residual heebie-jeebies clinging to their parents, they tabled all relevant inquiries in favor of more pressing demands, i.e.: "What's for snack?" and "Lemme inna house, I gotta go!"

As for the cab and its passenger, they were gone.

In their ones and twos, the neighbors withdrew, each to tend his own vine and fig tree (or, in the case of Mrs. Starrett, mum patch). Mr. Budd went back to his yardwork. He raked together quite a large pile of leaves, chivvied them into the outspread tarp, bundled them up, and dragged them to the large compost pile at the back of his property.

Duty done, he went back into the house to take a well-earned rest. He lingered a few moments before the open refrigerator door, dithering over whether to make it a lemonade or a beer and muttering under his breath about these fool young men incapable of controlling their wives. He concluded that he could give young Mr. Gaye some lessons on that score, damned if he couldn't. He made it a beer.

He had settled himself and his beer comfortably into the dependable embrace of the La-Z-Boy when the doorbell rang. Grumbling, he answered it and found that there was no one on his doorstep and nothing beyond save an unobstructed view of the neighborhood.

Well, nothing beyond that one could *see*, but certainly something to be heard, namely a friendly voice in his ear to inquire: *Anybody call for a cab?*

Something rattled somewhere in a house bought and paid for by someone respectable on Chestnut Street.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Burning Bright, by Jay S. Russell, St. Martin's Press, 1998, \$22.95

READERS familiar with this column will have gathered by now that I enjoy books that mix genres. There's something I find particularly appealing about the tropes of one being applied to another — especially when it's done well. Mysteries seem to be the most popular crossover, and being a fan of both mysteries and f&sf, I can see why.

What appeals to me with a good mystery is the voice of the narrator. Usually told in the first person, mysteries allow great character development, pointed asides on the various foibles and idiosyncrasies of society, and an immediacy in terms of how the story is told. That the narrator is often a wiseacre only adds to the enjoyment. What attracts me to fantasy is the impossible brought onto stage, how the

mythic can be made real within the context of the story; with science fiction, it's the speculation into technology and other sciences, and the chance to peer into, if not the true future, then at least a possible one.

Jay S. Russell has chosen to merge the mystery with elements of a horror novel, pulling it off in a manner reminiscent of William Hjortsberg's *Falling Angel*, by which I mean he's chosen a hard-boiled approach. His narrator is Marty Burns, a famous child actor who, with the revival of his TV career, finds himself in London, England, promoting his new show. He's barely into his media junket when he becomes involved in a racial conflict that soon has him traveling throughout Britain with a Hindi spiritualist and her bodyguard, an ex-IRA assassin. Also along for the ride is a crusty English mystic — and I should note that crusty, here, refers to the unwashed (hence "crusty"), New Age squatters who

can be found in many parts of the UK.

Their task is to save the world from a secret, racist occult society — known as Ultima Thule — by ceremonially closing various mystical British sites to the nasties, though naturally the actual enactment of these ceremonies is neither simple nor safe.

What's good about Russell's latest is that he manages to be respectful of various systems of belief (Hindu, New Age, Voudoun, the Jewish Kaballah, etc.) while still poking gentle fun at them. His narrator has a great voice — hard-boiled, humorous, sardonic — and the cast of characters is both wildly varied and well-presented. The only downside is that the pace of the story sometimes lags; not enough to spoil the book, but this reader, at least, wishes that a few of the scenes had been pared down somewhat to tighten the flow of the plot.

Brown Girl in the Ring, by Nalo Hopkinson, Warner Aspect, July 1998, \$12.99

From the moment Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* won the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest, there's been a strong buzz in the field for the novel and the

unique voice of its author, as well as for the Caribbean culture from which the story and characters are drawn. So I had high expectations before starting it.

Unfortunately, my first impressions weren't promising. I've read enough sf to find a near-future city core in decay to be a less than innovative setting. And then the characters weren't particularly engaging either. There's Tony, the drug addict, on the run from the local crime cartel; Rudy, the one-note (bad for the sake of being bad) leader of said gangsters, who is forcing Tony to help him in the harvest of human organs; Ti-Jeanne, the petulant granddaughter of the local healer/Voudoun priestess, struggling to raise her son as a single parent. When the characters don't grab you, it's hard to muster much interest in their problems, or how they will solve them.

I also found Hopkinson's use of dialect in her dialogue somewhat of a distraction. Dialect's a tricky thing. Use a little and it adds color to the story, enriching the author's palette. Too much and you risk losing your readers as they have to backtrack to figure out what something means. There's nothing worse than reminding your readers that they're reading a book, and this

happened a few times too often to me as I worked through the opening chapters, puzzling out phonetic spellings and sometimes convoluted sentences.

But a funny thing happened as I pressed on. Something clicked in my head and suddenly I no longer had to figure out the dialect, I simply understood it. The characters gained depth, especially the main viewpoint character, Ti-Jeanne. She went from someone who annoyed me to a character about whom I cared deeply. Even Rudy's one-note villainy acquired an understandable, if not excusable, motive.

And the story. I became enthralled with the tidbits of Caribbean culture, the Voudoun ceremonies, the mix of old world and new world sensibilities. The plot took on an intensity that literally propelled me through the pages. I struggled over the first fifty or so, but read the next two hundred in one sitting. When I closed the book, the patois of its voices went on speaking in my head for days. Which might explain why, as I look back over those earlier chapters to write this, I can't understand why the dialect ever gave me any trouble in the first place.

Now other readers might not

be thrown, as I was, by the opening chapters of the book. But if you are, do stick with it, for reading *Brown Girl in the Ring* proves to be a rich and rewarding experience. After my own shaky start with it, I soon came to understand what all the pre-publication excitement had been about; now that I'm done, I can only add my own voice to the chorus already proclaiming it to be one of the best debut novels to appear in years.

Kissing the Witch, by Emma Donoghue, Joanna Cutler Books/HarperCollins, 1997, \$14.95

Because this column isn't tied to some hard and fast rule of covering only the most current titles, we have the opportunity to delve back occasionally into the months past to consider items we might have missed when they first came out. When you consider that it's long since become impossible to keep up with everything published in the f&sf field, it's no surprise, really, that we can often miss out on jewels published beyond the cozy genre corner where we normally reside. The book in hand is a perfect example.

I know nothing about the author beyond the brief bio on the

inside back cover flap: she's Irish, has two novels under her belt, and is also a playwright and historian. What got me to pick up her latest book while browsing in a bookstore one day was, first, the title, *Kissing the Witch*, and the simple black and white design of the cover — both striking among the colorful array of its companions on a center display island; secondly, the subtitle "Old Tales in New Skins," intriguing in itself; and thirdly the gorgeous language that opens the book:

Till she came it was all cold.

Ever since my mother died the feather bed felt hard as a stone floor. Every word out of my mouth limped away like a toad. Whatever I put on my back now turned to sackcloth and chafed my skin. I heard a knocking in my skull, and kept running to the door, but there was never anyone there. The days passed like dust brushed from my fingers....

I got about that far and immediately had to buy the book, find someplace quiet, and savor Donaghue's enviable gift of language and story. Unfortunately, I was on a book tour when I found the book and could only steal snatches of time to read it in coffee shops and

restaurants and airport lounges where, with each encounter, I was transported from my mundane surroundings into a place where the fairy tales of my youth — still familiar to me from subsequent rereadings through the years — were banged up against each other in new configurations that both delighted and amazed me.

It would seem impossible to retell such well-known tales in a manner that can make them fresh again, but Donaghue has done it thirteen times. More fascinating still, she's woven them together in such a way that the threads of what I've always known as disparate stories have become whole cloth.

These are stories concerning the women in fairy tales: Cinderella, Beauty, Snow White, Gretel, Donkeyskin. In Donaghue's hands, you'll recognize them, but they'll be unfamiliar at the same time. For she has found new ways to tell their stories, new motives for their sometimes confusing actions, new connections between the stories that are at once surprising and inevitable when revealed. And from first page to last, the prose is perfect: spare and gritty, but simultaneously, resonant and rich with the poetry that only a few writers can find in the weaving together of the

simple words we all know so well but wouldn't think to place in the same evocative order.

Needless to say, I highly recommend it.

[An aside here. If you're as much in love with words as I am, I'd also like to recommend another book to you called *poemcrazy* by Susan G. Wooldridge (Clarkson Potter, 1996). It purports to be an instructional book on the writing of poetry, but is, in fact, a delightful compendium

of anecdotes, poetry, and, yes, word exercises, that invoke all the mysteries of great language while remaining down to Earth and rather sensible. Amusing, serious, magical, whimsical, this is another jewel of a book.]

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞

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Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Ports of Call, by Jack Vance,
Tor Books, \$24.95

Black Glass, Short Fictions by
Karen Joy Fowler, Henry Holt, \$23:

LIT CRIT 101: THE VIEW FROM HERE

1. Certain pleasures accrue from book reviewing. Reading is not necessarily one of them.

2. If there is an occupational hazard to reviewing and criticism, it's overpraising books. Not because they are all good, but because so many of them are bad, and the relief one feels upon finding anything that remotely resembles a decent piece of fiction (or, these days, the even more rare experience of reading something that appears to have actually been touched by an editor or copy editor) provokes the sort of hysterical response more commonly associated with individuals who have successfully navigated the Necrocoaster at Six Flags Over Willimantic.

3. BUT -

4. Sometimes you get lucky.

This weekend, for instance, when *Black Glass*, Karen Joy Fowler's

new collection, unexpectedly arrived in the afternoon post. I picked it up, intending to give it the sort of preliminary but utterly serious glance one gives everything that doesn't have a dragon or the word "cat" on the dustjacket; and didn't put it down until after one A.M. This is a superior collection, gracefully written but also utterly absorbing. I only wish it had been twice as long.

The author does not suffer from overproduction, the affliction that exhausts too many good genre writers. Since her first publication twelve years ago, Fowler has produced only two novels and two story collections. All are exceptional. She is probably best known for her 1991 novel *Sarah Canary*, a subtle, un-

settling tale of First Contact involving the enigmatic figure of the book's title and a motley crew of individuals making their way through the muddy, spiritually desolated landscape of America's Pacific Northwest circa 1873. (Last year brought us another novel, *The Sweetheart Season*, which I have not yet read.) The 1986 collection *Artificial Things* raised the bar for short fiction in sf, and now *Black Glass* has done the same.

Like that of her contemporaries John Crowley, John Kessel, and Nancy Willard, Fowler's work straddles the fence between traditional genre and mainstream fiction. Her characters are not unlike many of us: moderately intelligent, college educated, struggling with the vagaries of family, relationships, jobs. So Tonto, the protagonist of "The Faithful Companion at Forty," drives "a little white Saab with personalized license plates. KEMO, they say." And when Patrick Harris, the DEA agent in "Black Glass," registers fear at the thought of a zombie Carry Nation being co-opted by the Agency, it's not in the language of *Scream* or *Scream 2* —

His heart had never beat faster except for maybe that time in Mexico when Rico had

slipped and used his real name during a buy, and that time above the Bolivian mountains when two engines failed, and that time when his wife was supposed to be home by seven and didn't arrive until after ten because the class discussion had been so interesting they'd taken it to a bar to continue it and the bar phone had been out of order...

Like John Crowley, Fowler's work is steeped in the 1960s and the inevitable (and seemingly interminable) aftershocks that era continues to send rippling through our culture. But Crowley's characters are eidolons of longing, whose desires ultimately redeem them, whether or not they're fulfilled; whereas the people in Fowler's stories tend to escape salvation, sometimes as fast as their little feet will take them. That is not to say they are unchanged by their brushes with the extraordinary: in "Duplicity," two women vacationing in the rain forest make contact with aliens, and are imprisoned and presumably killed by them. Alison, the pregnant woman in the superb and creepy "Game Night at the Fox and Goose," makes a decision reminiscent of that in James Tiptree, Jr.'s

classic "The Women Men Don't See," with an even more slyly understated horror lurking at tale's end.

Most of these stories deal, directly or indirectly, with women's choices: to stay, to go, to lie, to heal, to kill. But the results are never neatly wrapped up, save in the somewhat disappointing title story, which relies too heavily on cartoonish humor rather than Fowler's usual subtlety. The rest, however, are marvelous; even the shaggy girl stories "Letters from Home" and "The View from Venus: A Case Study," which read more like late-60s memoir masquerading as fiction than missing pages from the Feminist Archives. Fowler often turns to history for her subjects — the seventeenth-century siege of a Japanese fortress in "Shimabara"; the temperance activist Carry Nation in "Black Glass"; various monarchs (of England and the arts, movies and mayhem) in "The Elizabeth Complex." "Lily Red," in which a woman walks away from a supernatural encounter, brings to mind M. John Harrison's recent unsparing novels *Signs of Life* and *The Course of the Heart*. Best of all are the heart-breaking "Lieserl," which conflates Einstein's life and work in the per-

son of his mentally retarded daughter, and "The Black Fairy's Curse," a haunting and succinct tour-de-force that may be the last word in revisionist fairy tales.

There is a striking clarity to Fowler's stories, a refusal to provide happy endings or even easy ones. These days that seems courageous, almost radical. *Black Glass* is a remarkable collection that reflects our own lives and losses, darkly.

I never read much science fiction as a kid. I did devour Judith Merrill's anthologies — they shared space in the library with ghost story collections — and had the inevitable class-assignment encounters with Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov, which left me underwhelmed. When I finally did read a *real* science fiction book, it was by mistake — I was about eleven years old, we were vacationing in Maine, it was a rainy day. My mother had brought a box of paperbacks she'd bought at the library, and I picked one up and started to read it. But because the book's cover had been stripped, as well as its title page, I had absolutely no idea what I was reading.

Turjan sat in his workroom, legs sprawled out from the

stool, back against and elbows on the bench. Across the room was a cage; into this Turjan gazed with rueful vexation. The creature in the cage returned the scrutiny with emotions beyond conjecture...

I read, captivated, for hours, sprawled in a chair while the rain beat down outside and I ate an entire bag of doughnuts from the local general store (the kind of doughnuts it's probably illegal to make now, fried in lard and doused with white sugar). The voluptuous prose combined with the misty green light and the increasingly sick-making taste of the doughnuts to produce an almost unbearably intense sensory experience, so that for years I couldn't eat a doughnut without having a bizarre flashback to Turjan's creations —

...the thing all eyes, the boneless creature with the pulsing surface of its brain exposed, the beautiful female body whose intestines trailed out into the nutrient solution like seeking fibrils, the inverted inside-out creature...

But when we left Maine, the coverless book remained behind,

and I still had no idea what the damn thing was called. It haunted me for years. I was in my twenties before I encountered it again, having embarked upon a late course of study in post-New Wave sf. Somehow or other I managed to pick up a second-hand copy of *The Dying Earth*, by Jack Vance, and upon opening it I started shouting: THIS IS IT! THIS IS THE BOOK I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR ALL THESE YEARS!

And so it was. Since then I've read a number of Vance's novels (though by no means every one). None, of course, could recreate that primordial thrill of *The Dying Earth*, but all produce a sort of unalloyed morning-of-the-world pleasure that I find in few other books, certainly not since Fritz Leiber's Grey Mouser tales. Vance's latest novel, *Ports of Call*, doesn't have the depth of the *Dying Earth* sequence (what does?) or his Lyonesse fantasies of the 1980s, but it's delightful nonetheless.

Myron Tany, "mild and dutiful by temperament," dreams of going into space, but his father sensibly insists that the boy get an education so that he may become a financial analyst. To this end Myron "enrolled at the College of Definable Excellences at the Varley Institute,

across the continent at Salou Sain." Fortunately, Fate puts her thumb in it, in the form of Myron's Great Aunt Hester, who has recently inherited a space yacht as settlement in a libel suit.

"Initially Dame Hester thought of the *Glodwyn* only as proof that whoever chose to call her a 'bald old harridan in a red fright-wig' must pay well for the privilege." But soon she is outfitting the ship for a cruise; she brings Myron on as captain, and heads out in search of a rumored fountain of youth in the far precincts of the galaxy. So it seems in its opening chapters that *Ports of Call* is going to be an sf version of *Travels with My Aunt*, one of the more intoxicating notions I've met in years.

Alas, not to be! After an unfortunate shoreleave on Dimmick, a planet described as a "graceless world, shrouded by a dismal overcast which often condenses to a pall of lugubrious drizzle... The most popular recreation is a program of dogfights, which arouse passionate emotions in the audiences," Myron signs onto a cargo ship. His subsequent adventures take him to the various ports of call of the title, some of them disgusting places like Dimmick, others only slightly more amenable.

Sexual customs are most peculiar and complex, and cannot be analyzed here. The visitor, however, is earnestly warned never, under any circumstances, to make overtures to local women, since unpleasant consequences may be expected, the extreme penalty being marriage to the woman involved, or her mother.

The book is almost pure picaresque. Plot has never been Vance's primary concern, and one enjoys *Ports of Call* as one does a Restoration comedy, for the sheer outrageousness of its characters and the precision of Vance's often lunatic descriptive powers. Critic Paul Di Filippo recently noted Vance's most obvious literary reference point, the works of Dr. Seuss. I would add that there is an almost Nabokovian detachment to Vance's writing, which actually meshes quite nicely with Ted Giesel...

"The 'blue' course will be best. Duhail, on Scropus, will be the first junction; next, to Coro-coro, then out to Cax on Blenkinsop...

"Now then, are any of you carrying power guns, flash-

aways or pinkers? It is imperative that we keep such gear from the local thugs, which is to say, most of the population."

"I am carrying my whangee," said Maloof, displaying his walking stick. "It is powered only by the strength of my arm."

There are also characters named Schwatzenale, Wingo, and Moncreif the Mouse-rider, and a creature known as the squonk. My personal favorite, however, is Imbald, "the so-called Sultan of Space," who builds a Trump Towers palace named Fanchen Lalu and proceeds to kidnap the most Eminent folk in the universe to its grand opening.

The formalities continued for three days, after which Imbald executed a few of the notables who had annoyed him, then sent the others home.

Throughout, it is Vance's voice that keeps one enthralled, and laughing—at once ironic and world-weary, the voice of an unrepentant opium smoker recalling some of the more amusing sights observed on his way to Xanadu and back. As Vance writes at the end of *Ports of Call*—

The universe had been opened to him; he was free to leave this frowsty little town of mad sprang-hoppers and, in dignity and pride, return to the cloister of academia, where his wry anecdotes of life on Mariah would grace many an intimate little dinner party.

Bliss!

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EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

TWO fascinating cultural histories head up this month's reading.

First is *Screams of Reason* by David J. Skal (Norton). Skal's last cultural history, *The Monster Show*, traced the cultural history of horror; this new book focuses on scientists (mad or otherwise) and it's as fascinating, entertaining, well-written, and provocative as *The Monster Show*, with lots of new insights into popular science (fraudulent or not) as seen through various lenses of art.

When I told a colleague I was reading Thomas M. Disch's new book on science fiction, he asked me right off, "How many nails does he drive into the coffin?" But I actually find *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (The Free Press) to be the one thing I've read this year that fills me most with hope. The book's an excellent overview of sf's role in America during the past century. This sort of analysis is usually written by outsiders who get the basics wrong, but Disch knows whereof he writes and even when I think

he's wrong (as in his dismissal of Mary Shelley), I find the argument interesting. The book ends with the anticipated gloomy prediction for sf, but I'm elated by the fact that so knowledgeable a critic as Disch has missed so much. Little of the exciting fiction from the past ten years registers here — the *sf noir* of Jonathan Lethem and Jack Womack doesn't even make blips on the radar screen, to name but two of many — and when I think of the many overlooked sf writers who *aren't* derivative of Heinlein or Asimov, I find myself anticipating the new shapes sf will take in the next century enthusiastically.

One of Disch's assertions is that sf originated with Edgar Allan Poe. The detailed argument points out that Poe was America's original magazinist — short fiction was his primary mode. By this thinking, it's easy to see both Harlan Ellison and Theodore Sturgeon as descendants of E.A.P.'s. *Edgeworks 4* (White Wolf Borealis) reassembles two more Ellison volumes, *Beast That Shouted Love...* and *Love Ain't*

Nothing But Sex Misspelled, into a hefty bargain with many of Ellison's best, including a couple of stories that haven't been collected before. *Thunder and Roses* (North Atlantic Books) is volume number four of Theodore Sturgeon's collected stories and also includes some surprises like "The Blue Letter" mixed in with classics like "Maturity." The story notes add immensely to the reading pleasure.

While ultimately not of the same stature as Ellison and Sturgeon, Reginald Bretnor spun many damned fine stories, so it's nice to see that a new publishing outfit has collected fifteen stories in *The Timeless Tales of Reginald Bretnor* (Story Books, 385 Hawk Road, Medford, OR 97501). If you think the late Mr. Bretnor wrote only pun stories, pick up this delightful book and see what you've missed. I particularly commend "Bug-Getter" to anyone who doesn't like our reviews.

For an interesting look at how novels feed off of short stories, try R. Garcia y Robertson's story "The Other Magpie" in his collection *The Moon Maid* (Golden Gryphon) and then see how the author's fascination for the battle of Little Big Horn grew into his novel *American Woman* (Forge). [Just to make matters murkier, the novel actually grew out of *another* short story,

"Happy Hunting Ground."] Garcia's love of history shines in all his work, as does his enthusiasm for adventure. The packaging of *American Woman* emphasizes the story's Western aspects, so you might have to hunt the shelves for it.

A few recent collections worth reading include *Clones* edited by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois (Ace), which covers the subject with nine good stories, *The Fantasy Hall of Fame* edited by Robert Silverberg (HarperPrism), which collects outright thirty gems, and *Nebula Awards 32* edited by Jack Dann (Harcourt Brace), which is another fine entry in a series that has never disappointed.

And finally two from slightly outside the field. Philip José Farmer's *Nothing Burns in Hell* (Forge) is a very funny, pulpy, violent pastiche of the detective novel. It ought to play well in Peoria, since it's set there. And when one of my colleagues at St. Martin's told me that Ron Goulart's new mystery would be *Groucho Marx, Master Detective*, I wagged my eyebrows and said "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." Not so; Groucho makes a good gumshoe. The plots take the back seat in both books, with the funnier aspects at the wheel, and that's just fine by me. ♪

— GVG

Seems like travel is on everyone's mind this month—it must be summer. Here's a real trip for you, courtesy of one of Eugene, Oregon's many writers. If you book your flight now, you might be able to beat the Christmas rush. Frequent travelers' miles do not apply. (Carassius auratus not included.)

A Holiday Junket

By Ray Vukceovich

SO WE TELEPORT FOR THE holidays to a world where everyone is required to carry a huge fishbowl all of the time. It takes both hands to hold

the heavy bowl, and once you're holding it, there's no way to let go. The fish in the bowl is a barking goldfish. It likes to eat spiders. The so-called Kamikaze spider is as big as a basketball, and it always goes for your face. Once you have a spider trying to suck out your eyes, you have very little time to perform the only course of action open to you. What you must do is plunge your head into the bowl so your barking goldfish can eat the Kamikaze spider. None of this was explained in the brochure.

Also big news to us is the fact that this is a world where the dimension necessary for long distance telepathy is missing. Just as sound cannot cross a vacuum, here thoughts do not travel in the ether. I could beam my intentions at her until I was blue in the face, and it wouldn't do any good.

What we must do is somehow touch heads. If we can touch heads I can ask her if maybe we shouldn't get out of here. If she agrees, and I can't imagine that she won't, we can hotfoot it through the forest and across the

creek to the exit portal which if I'm not mistaken I can actually see from here. Touching heads, however, is going to be a big problem, since we're both holding these really big fishbowls.

The sky is sea green, and the puffy pink clouds racing across it move too quickly to really be clouds, not that I thought there were clouds in the first place, since we came to know everything we needed to know about this world as soon as we popped into existence here. None of it makes me feel like singing Christmas carols.

I suppose I could just take off running. Would she get the idea and follow? Or would she misunderstand and think that I'd known what this world was like all along and that I'd lured her here to abandon her?

I cluck my tongue at her trying to get her attention so she'll come over here so maybe we can touch heads, but she's looking around fearfully like something might jump out of the feather duster trees and grab her, and the look on her face would be funny and adorable, oh you silly goose, if it were not the case that her fears are entirely justified. Even the little bugs on this world are as big as your feet.

She finally sees me making faces at her and comes over and our fishbowls clink together as we try to go head to head. Our fish thrash around barking like crazy and snapping at each other through the glass. Whenever we lean in to touch, the fish leap up out of the water and nip at our chins. Boy, if I ever do manage to get a thought in edgewise what I'll think is maybe we should have opted for a more traditional holiday with growling mall crowds and a rented uncle albert singing drunken sailor songs and fruit cake and santa clause and colored lights and disappointed children and eggnog.

I walk around her hoping we can touch from the rear, but as it turns out, and this is not something I'd realized earlier, our butts are almost perfectly matched heightwise. And the bowls are so heavy. I can't lean far enough back to touch my head to hers without spilling water out of my fishbowl, and if I spilled too much water and the fish got stressed and became maybe moody and lethargic, who would eat the Kamikaze spider surely even now tensing for a leap at my face?

I feel a sudden flash of irritation, and I'm glad we didn't connect just then. Otherwise we might have exchanged unkind remarks about our respective butts.

I move to her side but no matter how we arrange ourselves we cannot connect. Front to back? No good. All we do is produce a clinking clanking splashing and barking cacophony of goldfish.

Our struggle to re-establish the connection we have always had suddenly becomes desperate as I realize, and I can see it in her eyes that it has dawned upon her too, that we may never hook up again. We could be stranded and alone like this forever. We spend a couple of minutes jumping around making hopeless and helpless hooting sounds, grunts and cries, whimpers and finally barks not too different from the barks of our goldfish.

Then there is a quiet moment. The eye of the storm. And then we panic. I can't see her fishbowl; I can only see her. She fills my vision, and nothing matters as much as our reunion. I cannot rationally appraise the danger we face as we rush together and meet like belly-bumping cowboys and our bowls shatter and our fish fall into the high grass, and she wet, slippery and shivering rushes into my arms.

There is a momentary riot of chewing sounds from the grass, and then the worldwide bug symphony that I'd scarcely noticed before stops absolutely. The pink non-clouds gather above us like a fastforward weather report. Those black drops dropping will probably be spiders.

I pull her in close and we touch heads, and in an explosion of color and big bands, jungle orchids and satin cat feet up and down my spine, it's like a big part of your mind has just wondered off whistling, and now it's back and all the pieces snap into place, a cosmic ah ha and she me we spiral down and down to a perfect state of not quite seamless sameness, the two of us, the one of us. You can phone your congressperson, and you can write a letter to the editor. You can curse your luck, and you can shake your fist at the sky. You can drop to your knees in an eleventh hour appeal to magic. But in the end there is really only this.

We make a dash for it.



Robert Onopa's last appearance here was "Camping in the Biosphere Reserve" in May, 1996. This time out, let not the title fool you—this is no rock concert. Rather, this story follows the leads of Evelyn Waugh and Jessica Mitford with an offbeat look at death and life in times to come.

The Grateful Dead

By Robert Onopa

Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs.

— Shakespeare

ΕΙ ΔΕ ΘΑΝΟΝΤΩΝ ΠΕΡ ΚΑΤΑΛΗΘΟΝΤ ΕΙΝ ΑΙΔΑΟ,
ΑΥΤΑΡ ΕΓΩ ΚΑΙ ΚΕΙΘΙ ΦΙΛΟΥ ΜΕΜΝΗΣΟΜ ΕΤΑΙΡΟΥ. *

— Homer



WE WERE JUST SITTING THERE in the boardroom, Max and I, our black Italian wingtips propped up at one end of the long slate table, our backs sunk into

charcoal velour. We were watching the Obituary Channel scroll by on the wallscreen. That's really when it all began: during one of those moments of stasis which originates a seminal, life-altering sequence of events, an otherwise preternaturally calm patch of time in which the tiniest seed of

*Though the dead forget their dead in the House of Death,
I will remember, even there, my dear companion.

chaos fractalizes into a full-blown reordering of the cosmos. It goes without saying that what happened from this quiet beginning unalterably changed my life. It changed yours, too, I apologize to admit, as you will recognize once you fully understand what I am revealing now, publicly, for the first time.

To the industry, watching the Obits scroll by is "trolling." Different-sized vessels troll for different catches: the small firms troll for individual clients, those recently deceased for whom the mauve icon in the encoded rainbow of the color bar across the top of the screen indicates a still-open service contract. On our level — GD Inc. has six hundred franchised Homes nationwide and operations in Canada, Mexico, and Korea — we're more interested in demographic shifts, tracking market share, the kinds of data indicated by the shape of the color bar itself, its waves and fluctuations.

We started doing business even before "Elliott Anderson's Obituary Channel" was first bounced down from a satellite. Our genesis lay in the demise of the 20th Century "baby boomer" generation: as that population died off early in this century, the demand for funerals increased so rapidly the deathcare industry grew like bread rising under the action of yeast. We were the first chain to go interstate, the first to use CDC statistics to locate new Homes, the first with group plans (beginning with our benchmark contract with AARP). We shaped the franchise system of funeral homes you see today. So when Max minded the boardroom wallscreen, he eyed it with a proprietary air, like an institutional investor watching the big board dance before his or her eyes.

I confess I wasn't paying attention. I was staring past the wallscreen through our eightieth floor window at the mustard-colored atmosphere of downtown L.A., wondering whether or not I was going to be able to sight Object 21/3847 — a new comet, just named *Virgilius Maro* — as it finally hove into Earth's sight next week. My hobby is imaging astronomical objects with VHD clarifying video. I was concluding that the only way I was going to be able to see *V. Maro* for the full fourteen seconds it would take for me to properly capture its image was by leasing space on Mauna Kea. This gave new meaning to the phrase "visible to the naked eye."

"Pass the fucking embalming fluid," Max growled, "They're killin' us."

"Mmmm. Us?"

He pointed at a new symbol, an ideograph, showing up in the color bar of the Obit Channel screen. "Like who's this new outfit, Ancestors?"

"Asian specialists. In from Beijing," I said, stretching, sitting up. At least I'd been keeping up with *Post Mortem*, our trade magazine. "They started out as All Friends Mortuary Society. Special noodle feature on all banquet menus, monk's food, saffron theme. Niche market. Specials include ancestors appear in holocube...."

"They're not the only ones."

"C'mon, Max. We're still doing close to three billion a year."

Max took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, and spoke softly. "Not anymore. Two-eight is what we billed last year. This year we thought two-six. Now look at the way the market's turned on us. We'll be lucky to hurdle one-five."

"Really?"

"Your head's been in the clouds, Coop. Ever since Harriet took off last year."

"I am reading the trades." I blushed. My divorce aside, the truth is, the business end of things had never seized me the way it had Max — a business which, I recalled with a pang of guilt, had treated me very well (ask Harriet, whose settlement included a condo *complex* in Cabo). Lately I had been acting like the numbers had little to do with me.

"We were the first with drive-through viewing," Max ruminated, "the first with unit pricing, the first with mobile embalming centers...."

My implanted pager hummed against my heart. I used the excuse to ease myself out of my chair. "Cheer up," I tried. "We'll think of something."

"Well, you're the artist, Coop," Max teased with his crooked grin. "Right?"

Right, I suppose. I started out as a videographer, got into deathcare by scanning in sample make-up treatments on a part-time basis for Max when he was still Sczyczypek Family Funeral Home. I stuck with Max when the business took off. It was I who unified the company image with the Angel™ theme when we went national, I who selected the Mozart Requiem™ as the signature for our international line. It was I who designed our logo, the gilt letters G and D surrounded by a gold, O-shaped

frame, spelling in an oblique way a sacred three-letter word to those of our customers who wanted reassurance that they'd chosen the right provider in their time of need.

My only disagreement with Max had been over the name change, from Sczyczypek to Grateful Dead. Not that I didn't think Sczyczypek couldn't be improved upon, but how could the dead — let me call your attention to the operative noun here — be Grateful™? Oh, I know the history of the term, its use by a 20th-century rockgroup, its source as a descriptive term for a British ballad in which a human helps a ghost find peace. But we're talking about corpses here, not ghosts. Max pursued the fiction of their satisfaction as our trademark marketing strategy. Another one of our signatures became the Mona Lisa™ smile on the face of each of our clients. (True, I was the one who fabricated the mold for the plastic insert — who was I to argue with success?) But aside from giving the franchise its name, Max mostly stuck to the books and left the rest to me.

Which meant that I was the one who was paged that morning. I had a warrantee problem to deal with.

In the previous month the Westwood Grateful Dead had cremated the remains of a prominent judge. His widow had called the Westwood facility to report that the urn containing her husband's ashes had been — stay with me here — making noises. I mean producing sounds: creaks, pops, strings of rapid ticks, little noises like that. The Westwood unit had sent their man out, but he'd come back baffled. They'd kicked the problem up to the franchise level, where it bounced over to me.

You may already know me well enough to know that I prefer to work away from the boardroom. Yet that day the relief I felt in walking away from Max's news was balanced by a chill that ran down my spine when I identified the gray cast I'd been seeing over our flotilla of maglev Fleetwoods in the motor pool, limos whose paint usually gleamed so black they shimmered in the light. They'd started looking like funereal battleships.

I hadn't understood what was turning them that color: they were gathering dust.

It took me twenty minutes to drive to Westwood.

I found a pastel mansion at the address, all flat planes and glass walls; when I activated the residential scanner the door was answered by a tall,

leggy blonde in a microskirt, hair all frizzed out, green lipstick. "I'm her niece," she said, then promptly disappeared.

She left a rich cinnamon odor in the air.

Then Keiko MacPhee appeared in the foyer, dressed in black. She was younger than I'd expected, thin but sturdy, with dark eyes and full lips. Her long hair was pulled back in an austere way. I was struck by the way I could see her bones beneath the spare flesh of her shoulders, her forearms, her long elegant fingers, as if her mortality lay waiting just beneath her skin. Which of course it did. I found her very attractive.

"I'm Cooper Boyd," I said. "From GD Inc."

"This way," she said, turning and pulling me in her wake into a living room with a vaulted ceiling, faux rustic furniture, and a stark stone fireplace, a tribal hearth in the Nomad style that's been so big for the past few years. I recognized the pyramid set like a trophy in the center of the rough mantel as a customized Model 986 Solid Titanium Urn, our finest unit — a phoenix sculpted in bas relief on its front.

The leggy blonde slipped through the room, now with a jacket over her shoulder, pecking her aunt on the cheek. "Back about midnight," she said. Then she smiled at me through her green lipstick. "My name's Unix. Nice suit."

"Italian," I assented, pleased. I watched her leave. "Mrs. MacPhee," I said, turning my attention back to widow, "you don't look old enough to be her aunt. And yet the Judge...."

"...was a hundred and seventeen when he died. I'm...thirty-nine. The Judge spent a lot of money on life extension. And the dear man, he insisted on spending some on me."

We made small talk about adjusting to the loss of a loved one, about the house, about the noise she'd been hearing. Judge MacPhee, I confirmed, was the elderly gentleman in the nearby holopix. Big ears, a rapacious smile, the red and white plaid pants only judges can wear with impunity. Mrs. MacPhee — call me Keiko, she insisted — explained with quiet intelligence how the Judge, whom she'd met clerking out of law school, had died during his third artificial heart installation. She'd had him cremated on his instructions, against her own wishes for cryogenic preservation in an elaborate home sarcophagus offered by one of our competitors.

Above the low hum of the house's climate control, I was startled to hear a pop that definitely seemed to have come from the urn; it was followed by a long, low whistle, mournful and remote.

Keiko shivered. "It's...now he's started doing that."

When I looked at her in silence, she sighed.

"Oh, I understand," she said. "Those are only ashes and an urn."

"Cremation is very conclusive." I nodded slowly. She'd beaten me to where I had come to try, for her own good, to take her. I admired her good sense. "So there's probably a fairly...."

"...pedestrian explanation," she completed my sentence. She took a deep breath. "I'm trying to live with that. What I can't live with," she said, smiling wryly, "is a noisy urn." She looked away. "I loved him dearly. It's like he's still here somehow."

The urn made another pop. Keiko and I stood together in the ensuing silence and exchanged raised eyebrows, then she looked away again. There was a sensuous quality to the way she filled out her dress, to her scent, to the way she worked her lower lip with her teeth.

I inspected the unit, which appeared to be capable of surviving its three hundred year warrantee: terrific heft, perfect seams, that quality anodized titanium finish. "I'll take it in," I suggested. "Do some scans, replace the urn, see what happens." I pictured myself returning the unit personally.

"I'd be grateful," she said. "I'm sure you understand. How can I let go?" She sighed, then bit her lower lip. "When you come back, come for dinner."

"I'll call you just as soon as I know something," I said, my heart flooding with joy.

I STOPPED BY MAX'S spread in Santa Monica. I'd been avoiding my own home since Harriet left. I set my Lotus on autopark and ducked in the kitchen door after acknowledging the residential scanner. I was whistling as I walked into the den.

Max's son Lance — a pudgy kid, pale as a mushroom — was home on spring break from Cal Tech. He was as smart as his dad was savvy, but to Max's dismay he was utterly indifferent to the funeral business. Max had no other kids.

"Well, you're happy," Lance said, looking up from the green glow of a holocube game he'd reconfigured. "Did you see your comet?"

"Something like that." I smiled, realizing that I'd forgotten my sighting problems, forgotten the problems at work.

"Maybe you can cheer up Dad. He's really a case."

"Never fucking mind," Max said as he shuffled into the room. He was already wearing his bathrobe, a bad sign.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Try we lost the regional contract for Triple A."

There goes all that holiday business, passed through my mind. *There goes 500 mill. There goes 1-800-FATALITY.* I cleared my throat, tried at least to speak positively. "Max, you know, when we started, there were six billion people on the planet. Now there are twelve. I don't care what contract we lose, potentially...."

"What do you want us to do, start bumping people off?" Max had migrated to his bar, behind which hung my videograph of a slowly rotating Jupiter. He poured himself a tumbler of the green Japanese melon liquor he favored. "We need a new idea. Something big."

I was thinking about Keiko and her niece, about her late husband, about life extension. "Immortality," I mused.

"What?" Lance said.

I paused. "Convince the market that you can provide clients some way to live forever."

"We *had* a plan once," Max told Lance, his face crinkling with a memory from our early days, and now I remembered too, to my embarrassment. "We planned to holotape people," Max told his son, "You know, like a presentation thing about them, *THIS IS YOUR LIFE*, they signed on when they were alive. Once they died, we'd broadcast the tape on the anniversary of their deaths. The idea was, we'd beam it down from a satellite on Fox, say, or Disney, or Fiat. Like during halftimes, or even in commercial slots. It was perpetual care, see? Every year you'd come back. We called it *IMMORTALITY NOW!*"

"Cool," Lance said. "Technology's a little dated, but still...."

"A holographic eternal flame; electrons and photons dancing to the virtual reincarnation of your self," I quoted from the brochure we'd worked up.

"Very cool," Lance said. "There's your lost market share."

Max's eyes gleamed. "Market share? Did you hear this kid? Market share?"

"I like the technology, Dad." Lance blushed. "Why didn't you run the program, Uncle Coop?"

I took a deep breath. "Didn't cost out. You sell broadcast in perpetuity, how do you support all that transponder time, Obit Channel fees, all that? Turns out we'd need our own satellite, permits from the U.N. Space Agency, production facilities, all that for starters, just to make a go of it. Your dad worked out the figures."

Lance scrunched up his nose. "Maybe if you tweaked the hardware...?"

Max was beaming at him. But in the end, I knew he was going to have to admit to his son that the idea didn't go anywhere. I thought I'd spare myself the unpleasant part. "Busy morning tomorrow," I said. "I'm out of here."

Max wasn't at the office when I drove in the next morning, which I took to be a good sign — why take our reverses so seriously? We'd earned our dollar. So what could we do? By giving up on everything else, I was able to concentrate on my class.

I teach the franchisees what we in the business call "setting features." The corpses that come to us often stare up from their gurneys, eyes wide and mouths agape, cheeks slack from gravity. Our service is to make them look dead, not actually dead, transfixed with the abyss or vacant-eyed as cooked lobsters, but properly, conventionally dead. So we shave them, close their eyes, their mouths, shut the openings that in life were ever active: we set the features. We fold the hands, one over the other, over the umbilicus: a posture of repose, peace with dignity at last. The final detail, here at GD, is insertion and adjustment of the Mona Lisa™ smile.

The fitting comes in seven sizes.

It's a serene time for me, passing from corpse to corpse among the Angels™ on the walls, Mozart's Requiem™ in the air, murmuring with the students, seeing peace drive out fright on the faces below my hands.

About eleven I got back to my office and was able to start on the urn. It looked seamless, but a magnetic lock inside the Model 986 responds to

a proprietary magnetic key and the pyramid unfolds into four triangles.

The Judge's ashes were intact in a traditional ziplock bag: a generous cup of fine white and tan powder, bone fragments and white chunks, a couple the size of stream pebbles: although we burn at 4500 degrees, not every part of the body vaporizes, and some of the body's bones — the pelvis, for example — are so large as to resist reduction. Still, the total mass only came to seven point four ounces, a handful of dust. It is instructive how little even the rich and powerful come to, in the end.

I spread the ashes on a lab table for inspection. One bone fragment reminded me strongly of the new Matsushita turtle logo, but that was about it. I ran a series of scans on the urn's inner sleeve, came up with nothing. I tried heating and cooling the unit and listened for thermal flex noises. Nothing again. I delaminated the phoenix, sent each strata through computer-aided tomography. Nada. What the hell was going on?

I took my lunch up to the boardroom, brought an extra corned beef sandwich, spread it out on the slate table — but Max still wasn't around. His wife Dorothy didn't know where he was either; I supposed he was worrying the bean counters on the twenty-fourth floor.

Morosely I ate and watched the Obit Channel. Our GD logo continued to shrink as our market share fell. When I looked away, out the window, the atmosphere was socked in again, this time with a browner cast to it, like the mustard had gone bad. You couldn't remotely see the heavens; you'd have trouble framegrabbing a streetlight tonight.

Then late in the afternoon, using a stereo zoom technique from cosmic body imaging, I finally discovered an anomaly in the ashes: a tiny green drop, shiny, like a fused gemstone. Its hardness registered in the diamond range and its translucent surface, like Chinese jade, offered no clue to its interior. I thought I could make out a minuscule rectangle of shaded stripes, but it might have been my imagination.

Then I heard the little bugger creak.

I called Keiko who toggled on video when she recognized my voice. She was wearing navy blue today, which suggested an advance in her grieving process. I told her what I'd found.

"Did the Judge have any gems on his person, any implants, anything like that?"

"No implants that weren't recycled. Do you think you've solved the problem?"

"Once I figure out what this green thing is...."

My efforts were interrupted by a message from Max asking me to cover a business meeting. I still couldn't find Max himself — but since he knew how I hated taking meetings, I was hardly surprised.

Keesha, Max's secretary, gave me a wink of conspiratorial approval when she ushered in the sales rep, an ancient gnome with the unlikely name of Slaughter.

The salesman represented a line of containers suitable for the cremates of family pets. They looked like stuffed animals, fluffy birds and cats and fish with big eyes, had microprocessors inside and made lifelike twitches for months on a tiny rechargeable. "Max said you needed to work on your numbers," Mr. Slaughter said with a wet smile.

Has it come to this? I asked myself. True, when my black Lab Balthazar died, on the way back from the crematorium I'd wound up shoving his ashes into the glovebox of my Lotus, where they'd stayed for want of a proper spot. *Maybe a full service franchise should have something for everybody* passed through my mind. But this was going too far.

I ran Mr. Slaughter out. Keesha gave me the evil eye. "It's not like we don't have a problem," she hissed.



AS FOR the little green thing, I kept thinking chip, though I'd never seen anything quite like it. At noon the next day, I finally found Max. Inadvertently. I was tracking down Lance to help me identify the green blob. I found my call forwarded from Lance's holocube game to a lab at CalTech in Pasadena.

"It may be the remains of one of those new biochips," Lance said after a moment's study on the vidphone. "Looks fried. You can still read the barcode, though.... Huh. Lemme scan this...."

The vidphone screen was suddenly taken up by Max's face, bushy eyebrows wagging. He looked manic. "We're back in business," he shouted.

"What are you talking about?"

Max pushed Lance back in front of the camera sensor. Lance was blushing. "You're the one who gave us the idea, Uncle Coop," Lance said. "It started with your comet."

"What about my comet? What idea?"

"We're using *Virgilius Maro* to produce the signal we need for IMMORTALITY NOW! I've been taking courses in radio astronomy this semester. Did you know comets and their tails move through the solar system like huge generators?" He waved his hands around. "They come slicing through the system with a bigtime surge of radio frequency signals we get as broadband noise. I mean, comets produce it, generate radio frequency signals, in a major way. It's, like, the snow between channels?"

"Yes," I said, vaguely familiar through radio imaging. "And?"

"All we need to do is organize that RF noise and transform it into something useful — our image carrier, say. Digitize it, modulate it with the holounits you want broadcast.... Then you send *back* to the comet a one-time countersignal to reshape the original RF noise into the signal you want broadcast. Bingo...."

"Bingo?"

"Bingo. You've got a customized signal that'll be transmitted through the solar system on every pass of the comet until, uh....ten to the seventh over pi.... for about, uh, four hundred million years?"

"You're not seriously.... Max?"

There was his face again, shiny with perspiration, beatific with a kind of madness.

"Look, Max," I said, "It's nice to have Lance in the loop here, but aren't we reaching a bit? Selling radio noise from a comet? Isn't that a little out of our range?"

Max's grin might have been shaped by a Mona Lisa™ insert. "Not like we have a choice, Coop."

"It's O'Donald's, Uncle Coop," Lance said off-camera.

I saw Max wince. He was particularly touchy about the mortuary arm of McDonald's Corp., the O'Donald's chain. "Those cheap maggots," Max said grimly, "with their fake Irish Wakes and that stupid fucking clown, Digger O'Donald."

"What did they do?"

"They underbid us for the AARP contract."

Now it was my turn to wince. Perhaps we were finished after all. No business can downsize by half overnight and not experience disaster. I looked up. The Angels™ on the wall seemed surprised too. I noticed a film of dust on *their* wings; were we already laying off maintenance staff up here in the suites as well?

The monitor framed the faces of both Max and his son: the Earth and the Moon, Jupiter and Io. I imagined retiring into another life with a woman like Keiko, working through the night somewhere, framegrabbing shooting stars. How nice it would be to have that kind of human satisfaction when the business was coming down — a son you loved, a loyal wife. "You guys do what you want," I said. "We're due for some luck." I was certain, of course, that our luck had run out.

"Send me the chip!" Lance blurted out under a squeeze from his dad.

Part II

"A memory chip?" Keiko said.

"Apparently it survived the cremation, so it's clearly some hardened circuit. Maybe part of a life extension implant that didn't melt down, maybe something else...."

She was sitting across from me at Espagio's. Its aquarium wall bubbled behind her in an algae-laden homage to Venice, the Italian city which had sunk just the year before to rising sea-levels. Keiko's niece Unix had suggested the place, winking at me in a way which, I felt, boosted my stock. I'd needed the boost; the news about her husband's remains had changed Keiko. She'd put more holopix of the Judge around the house and she was wearing black again. She seemed drawn into herself.

"Is the chip readable?"

I recited again the printout of the message text Lance had sent me that morning. "Bubble memory nanochip exchanging gasses through a quantum field. Proprietary barcode, unlisted, bio range."

"Bio range. I haven't been able to stop thinking about that."

I folded the mostly blank paper down to a sixth its size, the proportions of a coffin. "All of us wait for signals from the dead," I told her. "We watch for signs that they're still there, listen for voices to tell us that they

still care. People are even happy when we hear that some deceased soul has done some outrageous thing, like disappeared from a grave or sat up in a coffin or made noise from an urn. As if any of that proves they're much like the living and that we're still on *their* minds. You have to be realistic, Keiko."

"Do you know I'm really *fifty-nine*?" she said quietly. "He was a bastard to a lot of people. But not to me."

I'd guessed fifty; not bad. "Mrs. MacPhee. Keiko...."

"First the noises, now this chip. It would be like him to leave something. Maybe he's just saying hello. Maybe...." She sighed, looking away with dark eyes that mixed sadness and hope.

Well, the surprise was on me. Life always turns out to be more complex than you'd planned for it to be. I'd only just figured out what I really wanted in life — the love of a woman like Keiko, a life together to complete my own approaching sixties — and now here I was, the rival of a bag of ashes. And losing. I put my two hands over hers on the center of the table, nudging aside my plate, felt a tremor in my palm. "Maybe you ought to get out more," I said, deciding to go for it. "Unix told me that you've been alone in your house since.... Go for a walk. Anywhere, to a park. Dig around in your garden." I blushed and muttered, "Have um, a fling."

She smiled.

"Well, it would be a mistake to give you hope about the Judge."

"I suppose you must be right. But until I really know about this chip...."

"Give me a couple more days. Just don't expect a miracle. The only *real* miracle is...." I said, waving my arms, "all round you." I'd intended to wave at life itself, but I found myself waving at replica Espagio's, at the movie people at the tables, at Unix, coming in the bluegreen glass door, a head-turner in her short reflective dress.

Still, my strategy with Keiko seemed to be working. As I helped her into Unix's van at the curb she let her hand linger in mine and smiled. "My niece was right about you," she said. "You're a lot of fun."

At breakfast the next morning I found myself watching an infomercial on the Obit Channel whose strangely familiar elements took a long time for me to fully recognize.

The screen had gone European with archaic reds and blues and golds, morphed into an ersatz ancient tapestry whose vague robed figures came to life holding hands and ascending through some sort of stagy empyrean busy with GD Angels™. A smooth, deep voice intoned: "Star with saints and heroes in a dazzling holographic celebration your descendants will cherish forever. Travel through eternity clothed in the authentic finery of medieval Florence...."

I recognized the voice from an ad for our International Line. Medieval Florence? The hair on the back of my neck stood up. What I was looking at was an infomercial for IMMORTALITY NOW!

I was even partly responsible for it. When we'd kicked around the idea years ago I'd suggested holotaping the clients (or, failing their actual presence, their computer generated images) in scenes set in the ascending circles of Paradise as imagined by Dante Alighieri. I mean, it had been just an idea. Now apparently Max had gotten someone to develop it.

I paged the rest of the executive floor for Max, got forwarded to Pasadena.

"We're getting great results," Lance told me enthusiastically from the CalTech lab. Max, who appeared disheveled, was behind him, teleconferencing with a bank of monitors; I recognized the rainbow colors of the GD Regional Franchisee Net. "Fantastic results," Lance went on. "A friend of mine from the radio astronomy club has an internship at the SETI transmitter in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. We're working with him. Dad leased the site for the duration."

"Arecibo? The whole site?"

"We're going for a burst transmission on the 31st," Lance gushed.

Max had migrated to the vidphone and joked about buying down the national debt with the deal for Arecibo.

"Cripes," Lance said, "are we getting bandwidth! We'll be able to encode enough information to broadcast tactile holography in a window of about eight hours real time. Then with compression.... We're trying to squeeze in a full twenty-four hour day."

"I still don't get it," I said, trying to stay calm. "How does this signal override all the other signals people get?"

"The way sunspots affect even hardened satellites, you fiddle with the magnetosphere a bit. *Virgilius Maro's* that big, and we punch him up

besides. Terrific lot of RF noise. Now if Virgil was just a little closer to Earth, ha ha."

There was Max over his shoulder, munching popcorn. "Isn't it great how Lance's finally taken an interest in the business?" Max said. "It's been a dream, to pass it on to the kid: Sczyczypek forever. Wait till you see the spots we've got running on the Obit Channel."

"Max, that's what I called you about."

"Virgil, everybody's calling the comet Virgil, don't you love it? How could we pass the Dante angle up? I know you usually handle the art director end of things, but how you've been lately.... I thought I'd turn it over to Fiat/Disney."

"Max...."

"It's a business decision, Coop." The way Max tensed his jaw when he spoke, that distant look in his eyes, reminded me that it was, after all, his business. I held my tongue. Anyway, I thought, who wants to paint the hull of a sinking ship?

"We're already selling units," he went on. "From six this morning we've had a lease on reference studio space in the Valley. We'll have virtual setups in every franchise city by week's end. Overnight we've sold sixty thousand slots of that *Paradiso* so far — hey, you think that's too Italian? ParadiseLand maybe?"

Max downloaded other segments of the advertising program into a window on my wallscreen and I saw more of Fiat/Disney's work, even one of the holounits themselves. Now I knew what those high production levels, those make-up jobs reminded me of: soap opera. Set in thirteenth-century Florence, laced with special effects, but soap opera all the same. It was painful to watch. I felt the way any writer feels when a story of his or hers is worked over, distorted. I felt surrounded by disaster.

It had been a good run with the company, I found myself thinking.

"Don't look so glum, Uncle Coop." Lance seemed a little embarrassed himself. "I got something else on the chip. Set of chips, I guess we should say. Apparently the, uh, cooking it went through? Thermal conversion auto-booted a runnable file to access mass storage? Or at least so say the probes. Amazing how the lines hold up. I think I got the power leads identified to the CPU and the bubble memory. Who knows, I might even be able to run that sucker. Or ruin it for good. I mean, it's really a long shot."

"Do what you can," I smiled automatically, but the room really began to swim around me now. Destroy it! I wanted to shout. Give it to me! I'll ruin it. I had just been comforting myself with a vision of retirement with Keiko and my rival's dust refused to settle, if you know what I mean.

After I hung up, different schemes passed through my mind. Get it back from Lance, send it down the trash chute, flush it down the john. But gradually, after twenty minutes of controlled breathing, I settled down.

I did have qualms of conscience about destroying it, after all. And I was curious about what would happen if Lance tried to run the program ("*ruin it for good*" ran through my mind). Still, I resolved to withhold this latest development from Keiko. I would tell her that we hadn't made any progress, that it looked like there was nothing to the chip after all.

As the comet approached, I could lose myself in setting up the imaging equipment, dirty though the atmosphere continued to be. I'd planned to invite Keiko to drive down to Baja with me, but word was even Baja was socked in. So I would have to console myself with beta-testing new Zeiss filters; they were ingenious: including power supply the whole set fit into the palm of my hand.

My specialty is the suitcase-sized observatory. There is a special pleasure in handling such fine equipment, calibrating the sensors, cleaning the lenses, inputting the current project's program, coordinating frame-action with celestial coordinates, running through simulations whose successes and failures both leave you hanging, peacefully and without messy human contact, somewhere among the stars.

THE COMET WAS a big event in the news: icy infalling interstellar material from the Kuiper Belt, a remnant of the formation of the solar system. The best estimate of its mass was a bit over a hundred megatons, the size of a small mountain, a fairly rare event. A comet that big, impacting the Earth, would cause an untold catastrophe, its energy yield on the order of 200,000 megatons of TNT, equivalent to all the nuclear weapons produced in the previous century. But though *V. Maro's* 272 year orbit would be close in cosmic terms, no measurable effect to Earth was expected beyond an interruption in communications, and an incredible show.

The latest data on *Virgilius Maro* — which everyone was calling Virgil now — was everywhere. It was on CNN, VNN, running as an occasional window on the Obit Channel.

A comet-related story was running on the wallscreen at Keiko's house the next evening when I arrived for my promised dinner, the titanium urn and what remained of the Judge's ashes in my hands. Yes, I'd told Keiko that the chip inquiry had come to a dead end.

I was feverish with guilt and lust.

Unix, wearing a silver microdress decorated with signs of the Zodiac, met me at the door and took the urn from my hands. She set it on the foyer table. "Aunt Keiko's instructions," she said. "She's taking your advice about burying the ashes and the urn in a regular grave. Burying what's left of Uncle — my *dad's* uncle, actually. Still, she's been like an aunt to me."

"I'm just trying to make her happy," I said.

"I can tell." She smiled. "She's out back...."

I found Keiko outside in the neglected kitchen garden, hands dirty but cheerful. She was filling pots with soil.

"Not much bigger than this," she said, holding up a parsley seed. I realized she was talking about the chip. "Nothing to it, then?"

"No," I said. "Nothing at all. My technician still has the chip, but your husband's ashes are otherwise intact. I wasn't sure you wanted the, uh, since.... No noises anymore."

She shrugged. "Something from an implant then, after all," she said, shaking her head. She drained her glass of vodka. "Now let's have dinner. I've got a fifty-year-old bottle of wine."

Afterwards, we sat by a fire in the living room, drank port and watched a bit of the comet special on VNN; Unix settled in with us. She'd had a falling-out with her boyfriend.

The special was interrupted, to my dismay, by a commercial for IMMORTALITY NOW! from Grateful Dead. Elderly men and women romped around a fountain in a cobbled square — Max had turned creative control entirely over to Fiat/Disney. The little cartoon animals splashing in the water of the fountain, the voiceover sales pitch, the promise of a *Purgatorio* sequel, made me burn with shame.

The tacky part, though, cheered up Unix, and she cheered me up, and we started to chat, sunk so happily in the sofa by the Nomad firehearth

that I didn't at first realize that Keiko had been out of the room for some time.

Unix blushed a little, smiled, and disappeared.

It was getting late, and I wasn't sure what to do. Then the lights dimmed, and I thought I saw someone in the hallway to the master suite at the rear of the house, hand raised at about the level of a console for a house computer. A moment later subdued harp music floated through the air. Then Keiko walked slowly into the room wearing a black silk robe.

She stopped at the fire hearth, her hands resting on the slate platform, fingers splayed, her hair down around her shoulders, the fire reflected on her face. She had continued drinking — I could see it in her eyes, in her breathing, in the way she swayed, ever so slightly. I calculated the time since the Judge had been cremated: a month, exactly. The grieving process takes different forms for different people; I had used my professional experience to read her precisely.

"The kind of man he was, my late husband," she said. "He would have wanted me to jump back in. You're that kind of man too."

I cleared my throat. Would you believe me if I told you that I realized then that what I had encouraged in her was wrong, that things between us had moved too fast, that for her own good I was going to turn her down, hug her gently and lead her back to her bed and tuck her in and tell her to go to sleep? I'm not sure I believe myself either. Oh, I realized I'd been wrong, certainly, but the way she'd said *jump back in* I'd fallen completely, victim to my desires, victim to the silky curve at her waist, to the huskiness in her voice.

Keiko and Unix, forgive me.

As it was, I was saved by my pager, which hummed against my heart insistently.

The message was from Lance. He was paging me from the mortuary lab in the basement of the GD tower. The message read: Highest Urgency.

When I found him, Lance was crouched over a jury-rigged assembly surrounded by a bank of instruments — I recognized a light-enhancing stereo microscope.

"You'll never know what ecstasy you interrupted," I said dryly. "What is it?"

"Uncle Coop," Lance said, pointing to an eyepiece. "Look at this."

I put the bridge of my nose between the soft cups of rubber. At first I didn't see anything but a mottled background, then discerned what seemed an aberration, a comic little figure, a smaller grid of red and white.

"You may not believe me at first," Lance said, his voice tight with excitement, "but I think that's the Judge. Or some manifestation of him, like a homunculus. It was created by the chipset when I powered it up.... See, first thing it did was output a nutrient program, carbon high. I used my Pepsi. Next thing I knew.... See, it was a sequence, started with the sound chip, to call attention to itself...."

"Christ!" I said. "It's a little person. Those are plaid pants."

I continued to watch the figure in wonder as Lance brought me up to speed. The Judge had bought into a duplication technology, he told me. "There's a DNA info base in nanomemory, quark based, really something. Then a generator that kicks in when that program runs, comes out of a lot of compression. Well, he reproduces himself, see? This guy actually figured out a way to live forever."

"Guy? What do you mean, guy? This is some kind of bacteria."

"Yeah, that's true, right," Lance said. "There's a bug in the scalar routine?"

"Scalar routine?"

"Formally it's the function of two vectors, equal to the product of their magnitudes and the cosine of the angle between them? Anyway, if you get the dot point wrong...."

"Lance, what are you talking about?"

"What went wrong. It's in the sequence for the scalar routine, what makes him this size. See, the chipset reproduced him all right, but the dot point got shifted. Got his scale wrong by a factor of one thousand. Poor sucker. I did the calculations. He's one one-thousandth the size of an actual man."

So there he was, my rival, who less than an hour ago, in the strange complicated way of human affairs, had interposed himself between me and the consummation of my dreams. Who, I asked myself, stood between me and my dreams now?

I started to laugh, but I swear I saw a tiny fist raised, shaking, directly at me.

I sucked in a deep breath. "I'd better contact Mrs. MacPhee immediately," I said, reaching for the vidphone.

Part III

That was the beginning of the week you all remember, the week that changed all our lives.

Later that Monday morning astronomers announced that *Virgilius Maro's* course had unaccountably shifted. The large comet was now headed directly toward the planet Earth.

Impact was expected in seven days, fourteen hours, and six minutes.

I see I've barely touched upon the catastrophic possibilities impact presented, but I'm sure you remember some of them: how a comet *V. Maro's* size had crashed into the Yucatan at the end of the Cetacean Era and ended the reign of the dinosaurs, how the current human casualty estimate ran into the billions. Alone in the glow of wallscreens and in groups from school auditoriums to cathedrals we contemplated the possibility of a conflagration that would produce rampant volcanism, sulfur clouds, an extended period of darkness, soaring temperatures followed by a new ice age, the extinction of species after species and eliminate most of the world's biomass. Scientists were scrambling to turn the comet off its course with a thermonuclear explosion in space. NASA ran twenty-four-hour shifts, and the Chinese mobilized their "factory-in-space" program to produce a delivery vehicle loaded and launched from the UN Station. Nukes were being readied and shuttled up, but as there were only a few hundred left on the planet, NASA was having logistics problems, and the decision to go with the Ukrainian multiple warheads (the infamous "cabbage bombs") made everyone nervous. As well, as we all now know, we should have been.

As for Grateful Dead, Inc., the effect on the firm was paradoxical. With so much potential death on the way, suddenly lots of people wanted to make arrangements. They reasoned, and rightly so, that in the event of impact there would be a run on deathcare services, and that the average consumer would be best accommodated by the worldwide facilities of a full-service chain such as ours.

Just after the President's announcement, I finally found Max. He was

up in the boardroom, sprawled in his captain's chair at the end of the long slate table, transfixed on the Obit Channel running full wallscreen on the other side of the room. His little fax dish had pulled in a library of invoices, printed out balance sheets and ledger pages, all heaped around him; on his laptop was loaded a draft page from the upcoming annual report to shareholders.

"Fuck the business," I told him. "Go home to your wife and son. Nobody really knows about this, nobody knows for sure we're safe until it's deflected." I was still shaken by the tic the President had developed halfway through his speech.

"Coop, we've completely sold out *Paradiso*," Max said with barely controlled excitement. "It's damned amazing. *Purgatorio*'s half committed as of an hour ago — *Purgatorio*, where clients gotta shuffle around these circle things admitting they ate too much or slept too much or whatever turned them on. Fiat/Disney's even working up an *Inferno* segment. We got couples buying adjoining units as gifts, we got groups who want to tape on the last day, like have a comet party and tape their segments."

"Max," I said, "all of us may only have a week to live. Don't you understand? The comet could hit the planet. Even a near miss...."

Max blushed red. "Yeah, yeah," he mumbled. "I'm no rocket scientist, but hey, Coop, I figure, it turned, it'll turn again, see?"

"How can you talk like that?"

Max pushed away from the table, got up, swung around and pulled his baggy suit coat off the back of the chair. He shoved his arm into a coat sleeve. "Gotta go. I got a presentation to give to FEMA. You wanna come? I know you're not up to speed these days, Coop, but I always feel better if you're there. Backup?"

"FEMA? Who's FEMA?"

"Federal Emergency Management. You know. We're cutting a deal on a pre-need thing. See, they got a mandated formula for disaster preparation. The front money on this one alone gets us back up over three bil. Ain't that ironic? Just when we get IMMORTALITY NOW! workin' better than expected? You dance for a drizzle, you get a hurricane. And look at you. Who am I to say you haven't been up to speed? Who gave us the comet?"

"Max, what's the fucking funeral business worth if the whole world ends? You may never have another night to bounce on your bed with Dorothy. You may never have another Monday afternoon to spend with Lance. Live a little, for Christ's sake."

As if on cue, Lance himself rushed in, his pale face flushed pink, waving a sheaf of figures that turned out to be estimates for the FEMA meetings. He told his father in clipped tones that they were going to be late if they didn't get going. Max jammed papers into his briefcase, folded his battered old computer, and the two of them ran off as I stood there, still scolding.

Even as I ranted on, I could see the error of my ways. There Max had gone: busy with the company of his son, awash with business, fulfilled. Do you want to know how desperate *I* was? I tried to get in touch with Harriet. She has a new hyphenated name — no, not just a hyphenated last name, but a hyphenated first name as well. NuKiwi-Harriet Finney-Boyd. There's no going back at all in life, is there.

At the request of Unix, I checked in on Keiko.

"How's your aunt taking it?" I asked in the foyer when she answered the door.

"She's doin' great. *She* is, anyway. You know, Coop, Aunt Keiko always went for those short-man-syndrome, power-trip guys. The Napoleonic types? I mean, really, now the Judge is as short as you can get, right?"

I looked at her with surprise.

"I don't mean to disrespect Uncle," she said. "He's my father's favorite uncle; I do love him, and I'm glad that he's...back, sort of back. But he's always been a real tyrant, little dictator bossing everybody around. Now he's even worse than he was before."

I laughed. "I don't mean to disrespect him either," I said, "but I could tell by the way he dressed."

"Myself, I prefer taller guys like you. Fewer insecurities."

I blushed. "Ah, Unix, I just wish I wasn't too old for you."

She giggled. "How old do you think I am?"

"Nineteen, at the outside," I told her.

"Try twenty-nine. Uncle bought a bunch of that life extension stuff

for me too, bless him." She was wearing that tight green microskirt again, and she turned and walked away with a provocative wiggle. It is extraordinary how a bit of information can change your point of view.

The threat of the end of the world aside, I remember thinking then, we live in wonderful times.



MINIATURE LIFE-SUPPORT unit, consisting of racks of equipment sent over from GD Inc. and two exotic consoles from Switzerland, had been set up around a lab table in the living room, a nest of tubing and thin wires terminating in a light enhancing stereo microscope. Keiko was there, apparently keeping a constant vigil. The Judge had grown but he was still quite small, inhabiting a heated area on a textured slide.

Keiko was a feverish specter. After I had politely put my eye to the microscope eyepiece for a moment she gave me her hand. An understanding had developed between us.

"How can he live like that?"

"He can't," she said. "His doctors tell us that he'll survive for seven days maximum."

"How tragic," I said, searching my professional vocabulary for the right thing to say.

"What's it matter?" a strange elderly voice said. I looked around me, startled. By the expressions on Keiko's and Unix's faces I realized we were listening to the Judge; apparently his voice was picked up by sensors on the microscope stage and piped through the home quattro sound. His voice seemed to come from everywhere. The effect was eerie; my skin tingled and I felt myself tremble with momentary fright. The voice spoke again: "Those goddamned NASA bunglers, we're all about to die anyway."

They were behind schedule, it was true. But even given their failings, nothing could quite justify the acid criticism, the savage personal insult, the vitriol that filled the room for ten minutes as the Judge described NASA's response to the crisis. And the rest of the world's. I spare you the details.

In the end, the Judge told me, his one regret was that he'd wanted to go out big.

Unix rolled her eyes.

I had to bite my tongue.

"Put me back now, goddamnit," the Judge said.

"What does he mean?" I asked.

"He goes with Aunt Keiko," Unix said. "Has to do with body temperature.

"We'll rest now," Keiko said. "Thank you, Cooper, for coming by."

I held out my hand forlornly, and Keiko touched it briefly before turning to be alone with her husband. The look in her eyes confirmed that I had lost her, absolutely, to a 117-year-old man the size of a tomato seed. And a mean-spirited bastard besides. Perhaps that's what it took to cling so tenaciously to life.

Keiko opened the top of her hospital gown and slipped him down into her bosom. Out of respect I tried not to stare.

Unix looked at me with raised eyebrows. "For him, it's the adventure of a lifetime." Then she swallowed and looked alarmed at having let slip an off-color remark.

Embarrassed for her, I blurted out, "Finally conclusive proof that size isn't everything." It was really a stupid joke, but Unix looked at me gratefully while Keiko pretended not to hear, turned with dignity to leave the room.

Unix put her hand on my back. "Say, Coop," she said.

It must have been the comet.

Unix walked me out to my Lotus with a shy batting of her green-lined eyes and thanked me for the way I'd helped her aunt.

"If you only actually knew," I said.

"I know. Look, what counts is, you did the right thing in the end. My aunt's happy; little Caesar is back on his throne. Frankly, I think she's missing a bet; I've thought so from the beginning. Especially now, with your comet in the sky."

Then Unix kissed me, really kissed me.

I kissed back.

She slipped her tongue between my teeth and wiggled it around.

We fell against the car, shamelessly groping at one another, sliding down the hood and along the fender and over the headlight, pulling at one another's clothes, half-naked by the time we rolled onto the soft lawn.

What can I say of that first encounter that could do justice to our passion, to the bliss that mixed with relief down through my bones? No words can quite describe the sensation — but oh, the touch of her flesh, the warmth of her breath, that moment of slippery joy.

We went everywhere together for twelve hours, having sex. Like a lot of people. We wound up in the boardroom on the eightieth floor of the GD Tower. I felt wonderful, lying there on the slate table, my black Italian wingtips unlaced on the floor, a cashmere sweater rolled into a pillow beneath my head, Unix's thigh inches from my teeth.

On the wallscreen new infomercials for our *Purgatorio* offering produced by Fiat/Disney were running. I hadn't quite understood the attraction of appearing periodically throughout eternity suffering one of the punishments of Purgatory, but when I saw the actress Candy Candiotti jogging around the Fourth *Cornice* to show her victory over Sloth, I realized that *Purgatorio* would sell out completely, too.

Later that morning I showed Unix around corporate headquarters; for all the volume Max said we were doing, you'd have thought GD Inc. was shutting down. The business floors were almost deserted, the Angel™ Imaging Center on skeleton crew, all but one of Resurrection Chapel's Dial-a-Faith windows dark. The usual staff was working in Preparation, but the Motor Pool was quiet, and there were only two girls down in Floral. I'd called off my franchisee classes. I took Unix through the Professional Education wing, looked into the great room. When I saw the clock on the wall at eleven, I felt a pang of guilt, felt I ought to be working.

It passed. *Let the dead attend to themselves a bit*, I remember thinking. Unix and I went up two floors and wandered into the Casket Selection Suite. We wound up unraveling a dozen bolts of satin and tunneling into a love nest of pillows. The funeral business, more so than other work, gives you an enhanced appreciation for life.

In the late afternoon we were back up on the slate table again. The Obit Channel was still running on the far wallscreen.

"Coop," Unix said. "What's that?"

A news flash was crawling across the bottom of the screen, text shot through with a red comet icon:

...authorities are investigating reports that changes to comet *Virgilius Maro's* trajectory may be linked to a bizarre 'lights out' phenomenon in Puerto Rico on Sunday. Near Arecibo, an unknown hacker diverted the entire electrical supply of the island to the site of the SETI transmitter for more than thirty minutes....

"Lance'll fix it. He's very sorry, but he and that friend of his down there...."

"*Lance*. What happened?"

"It's called a steering pulse, Uncle Coop, a microwave thing? Beam it up there. We heat up one side of the comet, see, fiddle with its spin. We needed to move the orbit just a tad closer to Earth to get the resolution we needed? The one we contracted for with Fiat/Disney?"

"So they miscalculated a bit," Max said. "They're just students. They'll fix it, don't get too upset. Hell, it's unbelievably great for us. You see the Obit Channel numbers? We're kickin' butt."

By then society had ceased normal functioning; people stayed home from their jobs, construction projects went on hold, kids skipped school. But the cities were surprisingly peaceful. (Of course, it was still early in that historic week.) Those were the days when traffic thinned and industries all but shut down around the world and the air cleared. We all awaited the delayed launch from the Cape. A backup was in position as well. We tried not to worry.

THE BUSINESS, you will appreciate, was entirely out of my hands. Cash and electronic transfer money flowed into GD Inc.'s accounts like water from a dozen fire hoses. On Wednesday I logged into the firm's proprietary accounting program to see what Max had been up to with FEMA. In the face of disaster, he'd been playing the market both ends against the middle. He'd contracted with FEMA to service millions of potential fatalities, but he'd so far underbid the competition that our losses would be greater than our net worth if we had to deliver from even a glancing blow of the comet. Meanwhile the virtual studios were holotaping IMMORTALITY NOW! segments on double shifts throughout the country.

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The actual work continued to stall. The dead continued to go unburied in coolers. The great room, the walks with my students, the lectures on setting features, the insertions of the Mona Lisa™ smiles, these were out of my life now. Some heroic funerals were being conducted: we did our part, sending our maglev Fleetwoods out undermanned, deploying mobile embalming centers, express shipping corpses around the country on chartered flights if it was too difficult for surviving family to travel.

You don't need me to tell you that the story of those times was an epic adventure which all of us helped write. I'll confine myself to finishing the inside story of the comet, since that was what changed your life too.

As you've probably surmised, Lance was counting on a fix of the comet's path but not getting results. And, as you remember from that week, on the morning of the great launch, the unmanned shuttle carrying the Ukrainian warheads to the "factory in space" blew up all but a dozen of the backup nukes on the pad. Then there was the problem with the guidance system on the back-up shuttle, which knocked the "factory-in-space" out of orbit and eventually back down to Earth. Thankfully no one was hurt. The Chinese still say that problem with the guidance system was caused by broad band radio noise pulsing somewhere out of the Caribbean. Lance denies it.

I remember hearing about the collision between the backup shuttle and the Chinese "factory-in-space" at Espagio's — one of the few restaurants left open — where I'd gone for lunch with Unix. I took a call from Max immediately afterwards.

Max said, "Do you want the good news or bad news first?"

"The bad news I just heard for myself. According to NASA we've got just one more chance, with just one more nuke and that old launch vehicle from Vandenberg. They're cutting it close — going straight for the comet. I'm worried."

"Then let me cheer you up. *Inferno* sales are through the roof. We've got clients wallowing around in frozen garbage in the circle of the gluttons, women biting one another, employees getting their bosses sunk in shit. What a good idea."

I'd seen for myself, watched a famous criminal, the Organ Bandit, writhing happily in flames in the Circle of Thieves; the punishment was only staged, but his eternal celebrity promised to be real.

"One more thing," Max said. "We've made our greatest placement ever. Lance found out they had room for half a kilo more payload on that last emergency attempt to blow the comet off course. So we bought the spot in the nose cone."

"And what in the name of God are we going to do with that?"

"We'll be sending up a cremate. It's like burial at sea, but much grander."

"Who could have the vanity...?"

"That Judge," Max told me, "what's his name? MacPhee."

I recall it was Thursday night of that week when society started becoming really unglued — lawlessness swept the beaches, looting raged on Rodeo Drive, anarchy on the freeways. Public safety followed public transport into frightened hibernation. But the weather turned gorgeous — the air crystal clear and the stars shining brightly that night when the whole power grid went down, the stars of the Milky Way lighting the bowl of the sky with celestial jewelry.

I braved the streets to Westwood on Friday.

Keiko was fortified at the mansion, spending her last days with the Judge. Max had arranged for a cortege of armored hearses to transport the Judge up the coast to Vandenberg Air Force Base for the launch when the time came.

When I looped back through downtown I found Max and Lance camped out up in accounting. Business was still streaming in; Max had Lance shunting in overload invoice servers into the corporate mainframe. Max was filled with enthusiasm for the Judge's journey as payload on the third rocket, but guarded about the details, as if he didn't trust me with them. A marketing vision of cosmic proportions danced in his eyes: GD's greatest triumph, he told me, the beginning of a whole new range of franchise-level services, symbolic of his joining with Lance.

Then fires began to smoke the atmosphere. From the eightieth floor window I watched a sooty cloud rise from South Central, then a fireline start further south, by Long Beach Harbor, where Nomads lived on boats. The winds were pulling the smoke across the whole basin. Even as I watched, a string of brush fires ignited above Malibu.

That's when we flew to Mauna Kea, Unix and I.

Since the late twentieth century, Mauna Kea has been the premier optical and infrared imaging site on the globe. Fourteen thousand feet high, isolated by thousands and thousands of miles of Pacific Ocean from the nearest landmass, Mauna Kea is impacted only by air pollution downstream from China, a high mustard haze which that week had slowly dissolved into nothingness.

It is a rugged site, rust-red and black with lava ash and boulders, the fixed observatories on their little knolls, a gravel road winding up from the astronomer's quarters a few thousand feet below. I found out I could image from the summit itself, a cinder cone just east of the large instruments. Unix and I staked out a spot and I deployed my small imaging package on the night we arrived. By midnight I'd set celestial coordinates, and we settled in.

We had a little self-erecting tent and good down bags, picnic hampers of food, our own satlink to watch the madness back on the mainland. But mostly we watched the sky, rich with stars, the great silver swipe of *Virgilius Maro* wide across the heavens, Mars and Venus bumping one another on the horizon, as if jostling to get out of the way. The firmament seemed a vast deep blue bowl; up there, with the sky so clear and nothing around you, you feel yourself suspended in space, a cosmic traveler.

We thought we could make out the launch of the Vandenberg rocket, its passage through the ionosphere. "Uncle's up there," I heard Unix whisper in wonder.

Unix and I grew very close. Our zipped-together bags made a womb from which we emerged only late on the final day.

As you know, the nuke merely turned *Virgilius Maro* off course. It wasn't the way it might have been in an old sf movie, blowing up. No, that would have sent fragments in the direction of Earth. Rather, it was a flash, albeit a diamond bright human flash, and then the turning, the quickening across the sky.

I don't mean to diminish it. What a night that was: the thrill of the comet turning, the colors spreading across the heavens, refracted light in bands of red and orange and water blue, Unix against my side, my equipment whirring.... It was lovelier, and more dangerous, than any other moment I have experienced.

The comet streaked across the sky, some cosmic fulfillment, an instrument, a sign of change for myself, for the world I lived in. As the rocket had slivered into the comet's albedo, as the nuke had blossomed, as the shifting colors had climaxed, I'd tracked the nearby click of servos and the squeaks of optical drives to confirm my hopes: my equipment had grabbed just the right fourteen seconds.

In the ensuing silence we stood there, Unix and I, our breaths vaporizing before us, the cold rock hard beneath our feet, our hearts beating together. I cannot tell you how happy I felt at that moment, how fulfilled.

My pager hummed against my heart.

I took the call through the backup monitor on my imaging equipment, my chilly fingers fumbling with the thin lead. Keesha was on the tiny screen. She looked stricken.

She was calling to tell me that Max Sczyczypek was dead, of massive cardiac arrest.

You of course know all about the near miss's unexpected effects — that tidal thing, the way the ozone layer was restored to pre-1900 levels, the way the lower atmosphere cleared. I remember the day after we returned to California, waking up and gazing through the clear, crisp air that had been with us since the comet passed. The rapid ionization of the atmosphere had picked up the particulates and plopped them on the ground, where they were washed by heavy rains; the world seemed fresh and new. It changed all our lives, that near-death experience.

Max, as I've mentioned, got a little nearer than most.

His funeral was one of the most spectacular and professionally accomplished in the modern history of deathcare management. It was understood that I would handle the basic interment, though I left the stainless steel instruments, the needles, the gloves and the fluids to Preparation. I dressed Max in his best black suit, picked out a casket, and laid him out, setting his features with a number six Mona Lisa™ smile. Dorothy helped me with his obituary; the Sierra Club managed the flowers and the stands of virgin Redwood offered in his name, Espagio's did the catering, Fiat/Disney produced the wake and the procession. The High Mass was held at St. Christopher's, with a little virtual hookup to all

GD Homes. Burial was at St. Mary's: Digger O'Donald was there, an orchestra, celebrities by the hundreds, with a special presentation by the union of professional mourners Max himself had helped found.

That was when I first spotted the chemistry between Unix and Lance. I was surprised, but then it seemed to me a good thing. I wasn't sure I could keep up with her, and she needed someone who looked further ahead than I do these days.

Lance and I run the company now. Max left us very well off. We have all that front money from FEMA in the bank, all those fees from IMMORTALITY NOW! without the liability to produce it as advertised; since the comet had been redirected by the Government under an action classified by the courts as an Act of God or War, our warrantee must exclude any mention of "comet." No comet, no signal. The broadband noise that had been converted into holounits from *The Divine Comedy* would continue to be broadcast by the redirected *Virgilius Maro*, but only in the path of the M31 Galaxy for the next four hundred million years.

We own the Obit Channel now — under a dummy corporation, however those things are done. All of the Angels™ have been dusted, the Fleetwoods shine, and our new South American division is expanding at the rate of two new Homes per week.

I still feel deep satisfaction with the image I'd grabbed of *Virgilius Maro* up on Mauna Kea. During the final edit I doubled the length of the hololoop. The finished piece hangs in the boardroom these days, replacing an image of Mars. The now half-minute loop, bright silver with a banded spectrum in slo-mo, opens and turns like a timelapse flower bathing in quasar light against a backdrop of deep space.

I see Keiko a lot. It's a bit unreal. Lance and Unix are a couple. We're all into life extension. Lance is working with those Swiss engineers you've been hearing about on the news. I mean, why not stick with a good thing?

One more thing I need to tell you about.

After all the dust had settled, Keiko and Unix and Lance and I took what remained of the Judge's ashes and placed them into a crypt. He had refused to take his ashes up with him to Vandenberg; he'd called it a morbid idea. The left-behind ashes had been moved to GD Tower, but Keiko understandably wanted closure. Burial was my advice, a small

traditional service; I was glad to see my thinking confirmed by Keiko's therapist and the MacPhee family counselor. The obsequies were set for a Friday afternoon.

I set out driving alone in my Lotus from downtown to meet the rest of the funeral party at Forest Lawn. I'd picked up the ashes from GD Tower and was carrying them on the passenger's seat. They were resting in a beautiful onyx urn. I rounded a corner, my suspension let out a squeak, a groan, and I found myself remembering my first encounter with the Judge's ashes in the Model 986 Urn. I started seeing him as a rival again. Instinctively, I reached for the glove box, pulled out the plastic bag containing the ashes of Balthazar, my old Lab, and exchanged them for the ashes of the Judge. The idea that the urn containing the Judge's ashes would make a noise during interment spooked me more than I can explain. I know what I did was unethical; I couldn't help myself.

Anyway, the modest ceremony went well. Unix had arranged for Scottish Pipers, and a representative from NASA stood in uniform and saluted. Keiko achieved her closure.

The thing is, after the dinner at Espagio's, when I was driving back to Westwood with Keiko, swinging up Santa Monica Boulevard?

I swear I heard something from the glovebox: a creak, a pop, a long high note that sang eerily into the gathering night.

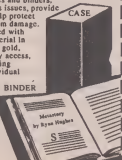
Keiko looked at me.

"Balthazar," I said. "Hush." 

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Mark Budz lives in Watsonville, California, with his wife, one cat, two frogs, and a whole bunch of crickets. His short fiction has appeared in such markets as High Fantastic, Amazing, Pulphouse, and Quick Chills; his last appearance here was "Toy Soldiers" back in 1993. He notes that this story was inspired by his grandfather, who recently passed away...but not without imparting some lessons on the importance of the imagination.

Zinnias on the Moon

By Mark Budz

LOOK FOR A BIG YELLOW patch," Warren's eleven-year-old grandson, Trevor, instructs. "In the Ocean of Trankillity. That's where the astronauts are gonna land. Only it's not really an ocean."

"Tranquillity," Warren corrects, unable to recall a moment's peace in the last six months, since his daughter went to jail.

"Whatever," Trevor says.

Warren steps up to the telescope, touches the tube with one arthritic-crimped hand. He squints at the gray moon floating above the feathered leaves of the locust tree, then lowers his head to the eyepiece.

The moon shivers. Warren refuses to believe the zinnias are real. They are an illusion. A trick of light.

Warren steadies the white-painted tube of the reflector. The garage-dirty mount consists of a wooden felt-lined cradle, metal support straps with wing nuts, steel piping, and the round base of a restaurant table, painted black. The counterweight is lead that has been poured into a tin

can and then drilled out in the center. On a breezy night, the telescope trembles as much as Warren does when the air is cold.

"Can you see the zinnias?" Trevor asks, his voice taut, filled with excitement.

Warren makes a dubious face. "They aren't really flowers," he says, uncertain what they are.

"Mom says Grandma's keeping them alive," Trevor says. "If it wasn't for her, they'd die."

Margery calls Trevor once a week. The only phone call she's allowed. Warren and Trevor have been to visit her once, two days after the zinnias were first discovered by an amateur astronomer in Flagstaff, Arizona.

"Cool," Trevor had said, walking down the hall to the visitation room where the inmates sat behind glass partitions.

As far as Warren is concerned, the only thing cool about prison is the dank air and hard concrete floors, mopped clean with liquid bleach.

"Mom says Grandma's keeping them alive with her tears," Trevor continues. "That's how she waters them. The moon is dry. It doesn't rain up there like it does down here."

Warren turns from the eyepiece. He knows why Emma's crying. Because she can't come home. It's too far, and she's too tired to walk. Or she's become lost, and forgotten the way.

Warren rubs the side of his face. It is craggy as papier mâché, laced with veins that give his skin a bluish cast. His hair is silver, the same color as the metal frames of his glasses.

"No one knows how they got there," Trevor says. "One idea is that the seeds hitched a ride on the first moon-walk. They been up there for years, waiting for the right conditions. Mom says Grandma just couldn't sit around and watch seeds go to waste."

The night air is chill. A bat flits overhead, wings scraping the sky. Warren gazes at the tiny blemish on the face of the moon. He blinks. The moon blurs, then hardens, becoming dull and scuffed as a tire-flattened dime.

"What I want to know is how come it took them so long to grow?" Trevor says. "Grandma's been dead forever."

Warren thinks of Emma. Impossible not to. Hands dusted white with flour. Skin soft and sweet as baking bread. One of many memories,

suspended like leaves in two-year thick ice that numbs him to the bones.

Warren lays a heavy hand on the top of his grandson's head. He looks down at Trevor. His fingers smooth a cowlick, and for a moment it is Emma's hair, soft as cornsilk, that he feels.

Warren leads Trevor into the house, a red brick cottage Warren built with his own hands. The house sits at the top of a hill, on twenty acres of Pennsylvania woodland. The past seeps out of the soil, and lies in a thick fog across the land, as if covering it with a down quilt.

Warren goes into the living room while Trevor dishes out a bowl of Ben & Jerry's Double Chocolate Fudge Swirl ice cream. A piano stands next to the TV. White drapes veil the windows. They remind Warren of Emma's wedding gown. The carpet is a green and pink flower print laid down on hardwood. Ceramic figurines line the built-in shelves behind the couch. Miniature children cast in various poses and clothes.

Warren cannot see Trevor's mother in any of the figurines. Not in the Little Bo Peepish five-year-old, the overall-clad tomboy, or the plaid-skirted young woman with blonde curls. Margery refused to be molded — shaped in any way other than her own. Warren's daughter hasn't conformed to any vision fired and painted by Emma.

Warren sits on the sofa, pulls a photo album from underneath the coffee table and rests it on his lap.

"What's that?" Trevor asks, sitting down next to him.

"Your ole Grandma was something different," Warren begins. He opens the book. "Let's see what kind of music we can get this old album to play."

In one picture, Emma stands next to the wishing well Warren built for her, surrounded by marigolds. She is short, barely coming to the middle of Warren's chest. Her hair, normally tied back in a bun, has come undone. Her hands are caked with dirt. Her arms are sturdy. Her ankles thick. Her face is cherubic, with the fleshy, rose-colored cheeks of a sixth-grader. At age eighty, she looked only a few years older than Trevor when the stroke took her. Another picture shows her with an enormous dahlia cupped in her hands. The photo is old, sepia-edged. Small bumps pimple the dahlia's feather-long petals, as if grains of sand had been pressed into the back of the paper at one time.

"Ole Grandma was the best gardener in Upper Burrel," Warren says. "I remember one year she was growin' dahlias for a show at the county fair. There was quite a bit of prize money at stake. Now, dahlias come in more varieties than you can imagine. In all shapes and sizes. But the breed of dahlias your ole Grandma was growin' that year took after big dandelion puffs...."

Emma had bustled out to the flower garden first thing every morning, carrying a dibble, hose, and pruning shears. She worked until sunset, weeding, watering, pruning, and fertilizing. The dahlias became kind of like children to her. A second family, of sorts.

"Alice shot up an inch last night," she would tell Warren. Or, "John's got the biggest leaves of them all," like the leaves were feet or ears.

She wouldn't let Warren near. "Scat!" she scolded him if he came too close.

"No harm in lookin'," Warren said.

"You keep your brown thumb to yourself. Don't you even lay eyes on them. Like as not, the minute you do they'll shrivel up and die."

Then, playful, she sprayed him with water from the hose.

Pretty soon, Emma put up a fence made of slats and chicken wire.

"How come you're doin' that?" Warren hollered from a distance, afraid he'd get sprayed again, or worse. Emma kept her pruning shears sharp.

"Just makin' sure I keep the deer, rabbit, and other varmints out," Emma called back.

At night, Emma set a mirror along the top of the fence to reflect the light of the moon onto the dahlias.

"Moonlight coming off a mirror is magic," she explained.

"How so?" Warren said.

"Because it's touched by silver."

The morning of the fair, Emma rolled her red wheelbarrow out of the tool shed.

"What's that for?" Warren asked, real casual.

"Never you mind," Emma said. "You'll find out the same time as everyone else."

Emma tied a tarp over the bed of their white Ford pickup, so Warren couldn't look in the wheelbarrow. When they got to the fairgrounds she scampered out of the truck faster than a cat out of a grain sack.

"You take a short walk," she told Warren, "while I get this here wheelbarrow unloaded."

Warren meandered about the booths, his hands stuffed in his pockets, kicking up dust with his heels.

"You should see what that woman done," a man said, hurrying up to a bunch of people standing around one of the sow pens.

"It's a dahlia, sure enough," someone else said. "I thought it was a cabbage, at first."

A kind of ruckus poured through the crowd. People bumped into Warren, jostling him out of the way in their hurry to get to the flower show. Warren followed along. It was either that, or get trampled. Not that he wasn't burning with curiosity himself.

When Warren finally got to the flower booth he stopped dead in his tracks, despite the shoving of people behind him. Emma had grown the biggest dahlia he'd ever laid eyes on. It was yellow, with spiky, red-tipped petals, and as big as a full-grown pumpkin. Once word got out, folks started coming from miles around to see the moonflower, as people called it....

Warren sighs. His chest and shoulders sag forward. "Your ole Grandma had a certain magic about her," he concludes. "She could make things come to life that no one else could. Including your ole Grandpa."

THE PHONE RINGS. Warren sets the photo album down, stands, and walks into the kitchen to answer the call.

"Dad?" Margery's voice is loud, combating the clamor of the Women's Federal Correctional Facility where she's served her time. Mail fraud. Repackaging regular powdered milk and selling it as breast milk. A neighbor phoned the police when he noticed forty boxes of Carnation Instant in the Tuesday morning trash pick up.

Warren sags wearily into a chair. He welcomes these calls and dreads them in the same breath. His daughter is reaching out. That's good. But the conversations inevitably leave him feeling helpless. Inadequate. He hasn't done as much as he could. He did too many of the wrong things. Warren doesn't want Trevor to walk down the same road as his mom. He wants Emma to help steer him in the right direction.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Glad that my time's almost up. Another week, and I'll be free to start my life over."

A new beginning. Warren has heard this resolution before, more times than he can recall. It means nothing.

"How's Trevor?" she asks. "Is he okay?"

"Fine."

"Can I talk to him?"

"He's asleep." The lie leaves a brackish taste in Warren's mouth...makes him no better than his daughter. But Warren has the boy's attention and doesn't want to lose it.

There is a quivering intake of breath on the other end of the line. A tremulous pause. Warren imagines Margery gathering in frayed pieces of herself, as if trying to piece together loose bits of yarn that have come unwoven over the years.

"I'm sorry you got stuck with him," Margery says. "But there was no one else to turn to."

"It was a blessing," Warren says.

"It won't happen again. Things'll be different this time," she says.

"Better. I promise. I've learned my lesson. Paid my dues."

"You sound better," Warren says.

Some of the tension in the line eases. That's all she wanted to hear, Warren realizes. Some small word of encouragement.

"I don't know how long I'll need to stay with you. Until I get my feet again."

Warren's breath pinches. "We can talk about it when you get here," he says, noncommittal.

"They let us look at the zinnias tonight," she says. "With binoculars. I can't believe there are really flowers growing on the moon. Without any water, or even air. It's a miracle."

Warren wonders if she's found religion.

"They look a lot like Mom's flowers," Margery says. "I heard that one of the big seed companies wants to buy the seeds the astronauts bring back. A company representative said that if the seeds can grow on the moon, they could soon produce the world's first waterless flower. They'd grow in the winter, too, since there's no place on earth as cold as it is on the moon. We'd have zinnias year round."

Incredible. Warren snorts in disgust.

There is an awkward silence. Warren is uncertain how to fill it. He doesn't know what his daughter wants. Needs.

"Tell Trevor I love him," Margery finally says. "Give him a big hug for me in the morning, okay?"

"I will," Warren promises.

He holds the receiver in his hand for a moment, listening to the dead air on the other end. Perhaps if he leaves the phone off the hook long enough, Emma will come on the line and tell him whether the zinnias are real or not.

Instead, it is Margery's voice that haunts him. Why? If he throws open the door for her, what person will he be letting back into his life? Or, more importantly, Trevor's life? Try as he might, all Warren can see is her face behind wire reinforced glass, as if the mesh gridding her off from the rest of the world is an extension of some inner prison she has yet to free herself from.

When Warren walks back into the living room, Trevor is watching TV. The news. An anchorman sits in a newsroom. Next to him, a television monitor shows a static-filled view from a NASA lunar module. The LM has just landed in the Sea of Tranquility, not far from where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin first walked on the moon.

A hand-held vidcam relays the view through the LM's window. The image is jerky. When it steadies, Warren can see a sprinkling of flowers in the distance.

"They didn't want to land too close," Trevor explains. "They were afraid they might burn the flowers."

The zinnias stand in stark contrast to the gray landscape, amber daubs of paint on dull primer.

"They're getting ready to go outside," Trevor announces, scooting forward on the sofa.

Soon, the image shifts to an astronaut climbing slowly down a ladder. It takes a while in the low gravity and cumbersome suit. Like moving under water, Warren thinks. The scene bounces, a kind of slow-motion bobbing that brings them closer to the zinnias.

At the edge of the field, the astronaut bends down with the vidcam.

Up close the lettuce-head blossoms seem incredibly vibrant. Everything about them is vivid, larger than life. The flowers are taller than normal. They easily come to the astronaut's chest. She steps close, reaches out one gloved hand to touch a flower. The flower trembles, then breaks. A petal tinkles to the ground, like crystal from a chandelier.

Or ceramic, brittle as old bones.

A few meters distant, not quite hidden by flowers, the camera pans to reveal a footprint. Ridged. A zinnia grows out of the heel.

"There's that one small step, Neil," the anchorman quips.

After a while the station cuts to a panel of scientists to discuss what they have just seen. They argue about the possibility of genetic mutation, the result of constant exposure to hard radiation. The unusual height could be due to the moon's lower gravity. They discuss the possibility of an extraterrestrial seed, carried to the moon on stellar winds. The seeds made it to the surface of the moon because there is no atmosphere to burn them up. That's why no seeds have shown up on Earth.

Another possibility is alien gardeners. Perhaps the flowers are a sign. An attempt at communication.

Everyone on the panel agrees that more will be known once the astronauts bring home samples for analysis.

Trevor watches a while longer then changes station. A horticulturist stands inside a greenhouse, surrounded by rows of flowers in plastic trays.

"Zinnias are probably the hardiest member of the dahlia family," the horticulturist tells the interviewer. "They can tolerate large temperature extremes. They're good in dry climates and don't require a lot of maintenance. If I were going to plant a flower on the moon, my first choice would be a zinnia."

"Boring," Trevor says. He switches off the TV.

Warren reaches back and pulls a fiddle from the book shelf behind the couch. There is an age-curved black & white photo tucked behind the strings. "Did I ever tell you about the time your Grandma turned vinegar into apple juice?"

Trevor frowns, licks a dribble of ice cream from the front of his sweat shirt.

In the picture, Emma is gripping the wooden handle of what looks like

a big washtub. She wears an apron, stained gray down the front. Next to her, big apples bob in a steel tub filled with water.

"Your ole Grandma and me were pressin' cider for your great aunt Thelma's wedding," Warren says. "It was the summer of nineteen-thirty, right in the middle of the Depression. All folks were havin' a hard time gettin' by. Not just workers but us farmer types, too. We couldn't afford to buy the sulfur and other fertilizers to make apples grow proper. Because of that we had a bad crop that year. Sour enough to pucker your bottom.

"It was the night before the wedding, and we were in a pickle. We couldn't take sour-tasting cider to a wedding, and there was no sugar at all in the house. That's when your ole Grandma got the idea to sweeten it up a mite by playing the fiddle."

She could play the fiddle like no one else. Real sugary, like. When she played, the music sounded like honey dripping off the strings. Warren could almost taste the notes in the air.

"You're crazy," Warren said, when he heard what she planned to do.

"You could use a little craziness," Emma retorted. "Craziness is what makes miracles happen." She had a stubborn streak in her a mile wide.

"More like bullheadedness," Warren said.

"Well, folks always say the Lord works in mysterious ways."

Emma carried a chair out to the yard, set it down next to the jars of apple juice, and began to play. Warren wanted to go to sleep, but couldn't. The music kept him awake like an itch.

"My eyelids are dancin' on their own!" Warren yelled out the bedroom window.

"Good for them," Emma yelled back, not missing a beat.

"You'll keep everyone in these parts awake," Warren shouted a few minutes later.

"You're the one makin' all the noise," Emma shouted back.

Warren lay in bed for another couple of songs. After that he got up, pulled on his clothes, and went to grab up his banjo. If he wasn't going to get a wink of sleep, he figured he might as well enjoy it.

The two of them sat out in the yard all night. They played fast, lively songs like "Shady Grove," "Old Joe Clark," and "Whiskey Before Breakfast." They played sweet tunes, too. "Over the Waterfall," "Midnight on the Waters," and "St. Anne's Reel."

By the time they were done it was morning, and both of them were smiling. Emma set her fiddle down and poured each of them a cup of apple juice. Warren took a sip, expecting vinegar, but it was the sweetest cider he ever had....

Warren moistens his lips. After fifty years he can still taste the apples. His fingers scrape along the strings, ghosting the notes. He checks the cuckoo clock on the wall. After eleven.

Warren sighs, pats Trevor's leg. "What say you and me pay your ole Grandma a visit? I have a feelin' she might be gettin' ready to do some gardening."

Trevor blinks in surprise. It's past his bedtime. "How do you know?"

"Your Grandma and me was married for sixty-two years. After that long, you kinda get a sense for what another person's got on their mind." Warren pushes himself out of the sofa. "I figure the lake is as good a place as any to watch her."

"Cool." Gone is the uncertainty.

Trevor hurries into the kitchen. Warren pulls Trevor's San Francisco Giant jacket from a peg by the door and hands it to him. He tugs on his own jacket. Trevor opens the kitchen door. Chill air slithers in from the back porch, laden with the damp scent of flowers from Emma's wishing well. A cricket chirps once, then falls silent.

The moon is high, wrapped in a thin gauze of clouds that softens its bleak countenance. Warren follows Trevor down the cement steps to the gravel driveway. Tiny stones skitter and crunch under Warren's feet as he makes his way down the steep grade. Trevor scampers ahead.

The driveway levels out at the road. They walk down the road, past hunched, introspective houses glowing from within, lit by the bluish flicker of late-night TV. All eyes are tuned to the moon.

A peacock wails in a nearby yard. The eerie, forlorn sound tickles the nape of Warren's neck.

Beside him, Trevor kicks a rock. The rock skitters across the road. Trevor's hands are stuffed in his pockets, his head is down. He gnaws one side of his lower lip.

"What I'm wondering," Trevor says, "is what my mom was like before I was born?"

The question catches Warren by surprise. His mouth works, his jaw muscles bunching and unbunching. He doesn't know what to say. It isn't something he's thought a lot about. He thinks back to Margery's childhood. It's a blank. Complete and total. Nothing comes to mind. Sure, she went to school. Rode a bicycle. Had birthday parties. That's all he can remember. Things every kid does. But nothing out of the ordinary. What she was has been obliterated by what she's become.

"Well..." Warren stammers, uncertain what to say. An image rises, like a fish surfacing from murky depths. Margery, nine years old, standing on the back porch. It's a dream image, blurred around the edges. Hard to know if it really happened, or if it's wish fulfillment.

"Your mom was always good with small animals," Warren says. "I recollect one summer a wayward hummingbird kind of adopted her. It was dipping into the hyacinth we had out back, when it up and took a liking to your mom. She was a couple years younger than you are now, and sweet as any flower. I guess that poor hummingbird got a mite confused. Before your mom knew it, that bird was followin' her wherever she went. Inside, outside. It didn't make any difference. Of course the hummingbird didn't know that flowers don't walk. It was just following its nose.

"Well, that hummer became like a pet to her. At night, it curled up in her hair and made a nest of sorts. Your mom had soft hair, thick enough to keep a tiny bird warm on a chill night. During the day, when it got to be hot, the hummingbird kept your mom cool by fanning her with its wings. A hummer can beat its wings a hundred times a second and hover in one place for a spell.

"It wasn't long before folks started calling your mom Honeysuckle, Magnolia, and Jasmine. This was right before the start of the sixties. I spose you could argue that your mom was one of the very first flower children."

"Like Grandma," Trevor says.

"I reckon so," Warren admits. Not as much as he would have liked. But perhaps he's been asking too much.

The gate to the parking lot is closed. They walk around it, past empty parking spaces to one of the soccer fields. The grass is damp. Barbecue pits rise like massive headstones in a graveyard. Just down the hill, waves lap rhythmically to the tireless croaking of frogs.

Warren stops at the crest of the hill. "This looks like a good spot."

He lies down on the grass, folding his arms across his chest. Tufts of lumpy grass press into his shoulder blades and the back of his head. A mosquito whines in one ear. Cattails swish in the night breeze exhaled by the sky.

The sky is huge — so close it seems he can reach out and touch it. The stars are a blanket of light. Warren can feel the universe embracing the world, pulling it close with infinite arms.

"That constellation is called Perseus," Warren says, pointing.

Trevor's gaze follows Warren's outstretched arm. A flash of red light streaks between the stars.

"One of God's fireflies," Warren says, quoting Emma. "They come only once a year. You have to watch close, else you'll miss 'em. If you do see one, you have to hold onto it as long as you can, 'cause there's no tellin' when another one'll happen by."

"I bet that's how the zinnias made it onto the moon," Trevor speculates. "Do you think that was Grandma's footprint?"

Warren doesn't know what to think. He wants to be young again like Trevor, open to every possibility, no matter how far-fetched. He wants Margery's faith, however blind, that things will get better. He wants the present to be as alive as the past.

"Did Grandma ever wear boots?" Trevor persists. "Maybe it shows in one of the pictures."

More than anything, though, Warren wants to believe that Emma is out there somewhere, watching over him, tending him the way she did her garden. He wants to believe that it is still possible to grow; that life takes root in the most desolate places, regardless of how dry, cold, or barren.

He wants to believe in life after death. Not just for the dead, but for the living they leave behind.

The moon silvers the birch trees lining the edge of the lake. It is brighter than ever. A wisp of cloud, white with hairlines of gray, arches above the moon, like one of Emma's inquisitive eyebrows.

Caught in her gaze, Warren feels he can reach out and touch everything. The child that he was. The old man that he is.

"I wonder if these are the same seeds that're on the moon?" Trevor

asks. He's holding up a photograph, looking at it in the moonlight — not the front but the back, where tiny seeds freckle the paper, held in place with transparent tape.

Warren reaches up, touches the seeds with the tip of his finger. Even though he can't see the front of the photograph, he knows it's the picture of Emma holding her prize-winning dahlia. He never thought to check the back of it.

"I bet they are," Trevor says. "A few of them could have made it to the Earth. They might not have burned up."

Warren shakes his head. Crazy.

Emma's lacy handwriting filigrees the upper right hand corner of the photo. "For Margy and Trevor," he reads. "A small gift from Heaven. May it last a lifetime. Love always, Emma." The date is three days before her death, as if she had known what lay ahead.

"Can we plant them?" Trevor says.

Warren swallows. He fumbles for Trevor's hand, finds it, squeezes hard, and finds his voice. Husky. "I reckon we ought to find out what your ole Grandma had in mind."

"Cool!" Trevor says, his eyes bright. "When?"

"As soon as your mom gets here."

"But that's a whole week!" Trevor complains. "Can't we plant them in the morning?"

"They won't grow without both of you watchin' over 'em," Warren says after a short pause. "That's why your ole Grandma put down both your names. You got to have the right conditions."

"Like on the moon," Trevor says.

Warren nods. He stares up at the moon, to the Sea of Tranquillity, where the zinnias are slowly spreading, banishing the gray.



Richard Bowes's novels include War Child, Feral Cell, and the forthcoming Kevin Grierson novel Minions of the Moon. He has lived in New York for many years and continues to explore the city in his fiction, such as in this new one where a very old story is replayed in a modern setting.

Diana in the Spring

By Richard Bowes



ASKED ONCE AT A SEMINAR at Lincoln Center to describe his job, Harry Sisk replied, "It's all about hunting. Sometimes, I'm out looking for usable properties.

Other times I'm the quarry. People with ideas looking for me." Harry was Literary Manager of the Players', an off-Broadway theater company.

Late one morning last May, he set out from home with a copy of the tales of the Brothers Grimm under his arm. Harry lived in an 1870s rectory way east near Avenue C. He got the whole third floor dirt cheap when the place went co-op and had fixed it up quite nicely.

The block was stable enough. The church next door, much revamped, was an East Village community center with a health clinic and outreach services. In winter, fires burned in the vacant lot across from Harry's front windows. In summer, the air pulsed with boom box rap; mothers leaned out windows and watched their kids dodge traffic.

Down the street in an old garage, a group of locals worked a chop shop stripping and refurbishing stolen cars. As Harry always said, "I've never

had any trouble. My neighbors can't figure out what I do and I make it a point not to know what they do."

That morning, Harry smiled at Rosalita and Carmen, the one pregnant, the other pushing a carriage. They had dropped out of high school to make babies. He could remember when they were in kindergarten. He nodded at their brothers, Joey, Angelo, and Miguel, who hung on the corner. But the boys gazed across the street in awe.

Around a black Camaro were several guys Harry might have identified as neighborhood dealers. They stood listening respectfully to a woman Harry had never seen before. As tall as any of them, dressed in dark slacks and a leather jacket, she leaned against the car with taut grace, as if at any moment she might leap.

Harry caught the light coffee color of her skin, the hint of a slight smile accenting the perfect line of her profile, a golden sparkle in her dark hair. At the end of the block, he looked back. But the group had dispersed and she was gone. Harry realized that his hands and feet were cold as ice.

He walked along St. Mark's Place, enjoying tourist girls in their spring dresses. At Lafayette he turned south past the Astor Place Theater where the Blue Man Group was a solid hit, past the Public which was supposed to have money troubles but where they had a couple of shows running.

The Players' down on Bond Street was dark. The marquee still advertised the last production, a musical about sexual mores in the age of AIDS. This had aroused no great critical or popular interest and closed after its six-week subscription run. Harry avoided looking at the black cavern that was the main stage, ducked into the box office, picked up his mail and messages, then hurried to his cubbyhole upstairs.

Unread manuscripts were piled on a table. His desk was littered with grant applications. A phone rang in the box office. Down the hall, an acting class ran through exercises. None of the mail held any promise. Harry returned some phone calls.

Financially, things were tight. There had been a few dry years and as Harry's boss, the Creative Director, put it, "We need either a hit or a sucker with money." She and Harry had been an off and on item since Yale Drama School sixteen years before. The money crisis had done nothing for their relationship.

Now, the Creative Director was in England scouting play prospects that Harry had recommended. Before leaving, she had thrown out an idea. Or rather she had ordered him to come up with an idea. "A performance piece, something the workshop could do. Maybe for children but savvy enough for adults. And cheap," she had added, "just actors and lights and public domain music and old legends or something."

Which was why on that spring day Harry picked up the Grimms and scanned one more story of an enchanted prince, a poor maiden, and a magic saucepan. Then, noticing the time, he jumped up, called, "I'll be back as soon as I can," as he dashed past the box office. Taking the BMT down to Centre Street, he hurried to the rear of the State Supreme Court Building, went through the DA's entrance and rode an elevator up twelve stories to what looked like a classroom.

Tiers of busted stuffed seats and battered folding desks rose toward open windows. A week or so before, through a failure of will, Harry had been empaneled as a member of a grand jury. The luck of the draw and the mix of the community had yielded a nurse from Harlem, a cab driver from the Lower East Side, several computer programmers, a retired school teacher who lived in Stuyvesant Town, a business woman, a little man with thick glasses and red hair who never said what he did and, this being New York, a few people in the arts.

On their first day, a short, curly-haired kid well into his thirties had done a small double take, gone to the empty seat next to Harry Sisk and asked, "Okay if I sit here?" Harry looked up at the enthusiastic face and immediately identified an actor/waiter. The kid said, "My name's Bobby Vernon. And I know who you are, Mr. Sisk. You spoke at the Berghof Studio."

Harry had smiled a polite but distant smile, then noticed a young woman at the door who hesitated, looking over the available places. Her clothes were grab bag and her features too large to be really beautiful. But she had a long neck that Harry saw as swanlike and she carried copies of *Art in America* and *TV Guide*. Alone of those in the room, she held some promise of mild mystery and minor intrigue to occupy his month on the jury.

Harry had given no sign that he noticed her as he removed his belongings from the desk next to his. She moved in his direction. When

she sat down and he introduced himself, she gave her name as Serena. Nothing more, nothing less.

At the start, they had been told, "You don't determine guilt or innocence. A simple majority, twelve of you, is needed to decide if there's enough evidence for a trial. That's an indictment. This jury will only hear narcotics cases. 'Operation Street Sweep' is underway against the crack trade on the Upper West Side and Harlem. Mostly you will hear arresting officers, rarely will you hear defendants." That first afternoon, they indicted a dozen people.

A week later, as Harry took his seat between Serena and Bobby, the foreman, a CPA, put down his copy of the *Trial of Socrates*. A side door opened and a stenographer and a brisk young Asian assistant DA in a good suit entered. The Asian told them, "Members of the jury, Kent Tom here. We have a Class C Narcotics case for you today. People of New York versus Hector Turner. There will be two witnesses, both police sergeants."

The jury hardly looked up as the door opened for a pleasant black man with a gold badge on the front of his jogging suit and a gun stuck in his waistband. DA Tom asked, "Sergeant, would you describe your actions around ten P.M. on the evening of April eighth of this year?"

On Harry's left, Serena muttered, "This just isn't like television," as though that were a telling criticism. In conversation, he had learned that while Serena managed a store in Chelsea, she was a conceptual artist. "Working with images of our religious icons, that is TV. You know, Dan Rather with a crown of thorns, that kind of thing."

"...Broadway near One Hundred and Fortieth Street," testified the sergeant. "I was approached by a man I nicknamed Pie Hat, because I didn't know his name and his hat reminded me of a pizza." He grinned and a couple of the jurors laughed.

Then Bobby, who, unsurprisingly, was auditioning and waiting tables uptown, leaned over to Harry and whispered, "Are you reading the Grimms for pleasure or business?"

"A little of both."

"...didn't have no Red Dragon, but told me he had Batman which was better and cheaper," said the sergeant.

"Both those are street names for crack cocaine?" Tom asked.

"Yes sir. He took me over to a doorway on the northwest corner of Broadway and One Forty..."

"I wondered," murmured Bobby, "because Sondheim and Lapine did that in *Into the Woods*. And Martha Clark..." Harry smiled politely and pretended to listen to the testimony, realizing that even a featherhead like Bobby knew this material was stale.

"...in the course of time you saw the accused whom you nicknamed Pie Hat?"

"Yes sir. As I drove down Amsterdam Avenue about an hour later I saw him in custody."

"And did you subsequently learn his real name?"

"Yes, I did. It was Hector Turner."

"Thank you, sergeant. You may wait outside. Next witness."

The arresting sergeant was a stocky white woman. Young Tom questioned her, read the chemist's report on the narcotics, then said, "I will leave you to your deliberations."

"Any discussion?" asked the foreman.

The little red-headed man, who reminded Harry of Rumpelstiltskin, said, as he often did, "If you want to railroad these defendants, go right ahead. But wake up to the fact that this is just some police scam to pile up statistics and make themselves look good. What we're doing isn't going to make any difference in how much drugs get sold."

"I got no big thing for the police," said the nurse. "But I live up where they're arresting. Anything they can do for that neighborhood is God's work."

"I think it's time to vote," said the foreman.

"This is ridiculous!" the little man said. Judging by what went on in his own neighborhood, Harry was inclined to agree but said nothing. Seventeen jurors voted to indict.

That afternoon, as he had several times before, Bobby invited Harry out for a drink. This time he consented. They sat in a little place Bobby knew about and the actor asked him, "How's the project?"

Harry shrugged, sorry he had ever mentioned it. "Still in development."

Bobby spoke fast, breathlessly. "I had an idea yesterday. Actors would love to transform themselves on stage, change before the audience's

eyes. Princes become frogs. Maidens become trees. Humor and horror! Basic theater magic! All you need is a few of the right people."

Days went by. Harry sat in the jury room between Serena and Bobby, listening to accounts of the arrest of people very much like his neighbors. Some cases held variations: a shot fired, a baby found in a crack den, a thin black woman with pain-filled eyes testifying about her abduction and rape at the hands of a dealer. But usually the cases were as alike as the prosecutors and police could make them.

Jurors surreptitiously read *People* magazine or the sports pages of the *Post* while testimony was being given. Harry Sisk glanced at *Variety* as a young Hispanic woman DA said, "We have a Class C narcotics case today. There will be two witnesses, both police officers." They groaned. "I see this is an experienced jury. I will call the first witness."

When she did, Harry heard Bobby on one side murmur, "Oh my!" and Serena on the other say reverentially, "This one is television." Harry looked up and caught again the half smile on the perfect features. Her presence was even more powerful in this room than on his block. The brown eyes flecked with gold were beautiful and yet so hard that they seemed to reflect light.

Most of the undercover cops who testified showed the law officer beneath the disguise. Some appeared who seemed to have gone too often to the places where drugs and money change hands. This young woman showed neither the ravages of the street nor the police force as she stared unseeing through the jury.

"Do you swear that the evidence that you shall give is true?" the foreman asked.

"I do."

The DA went through the testimony slowly, calmly, sentence by sentence as if she knew better than to make sudden moves. "How many capsules did you purchase from the seller?"

"Three."

"In the course of time did you see the person who sold you the crack cocaine, Officer?"

"Yes."

Harry searched the exquisite face for a sign of mortal understanding.

"And did you learn his name?"

"Yes."

Harry looked at the badge pinned to the jacket, saw the outline of a gun in the waistband. She had the power of life and death.

The DA was asking, "Any questions from the jury? No. That's all for now. Thank you, Officer."

Harry watched as the witness rose and exited in a single, uninterrupted move.

Afterward, he and Serena stopped for espresso at an old café he knew in Little Italy, a place of dark wood, tin ceilings, and, in late afternoons, a fine pearl gray light. Thinking of the one who had just testified, he was struck by the bad posture of the woman opposite him. In the last couple of weeks, he'd heard all about her problems at work and with her roommate. She hadn't shown him any of her art yet. But he knew that would be next.

He said, "You mentioned that one who testified today was like television. You meant unreal?"

"I meant more than real. If this country was actually television, all the police would look like she does. Gods today are whoever is on the tube. If Jesus came back, he'd do it on TV. The Buddha, Mohammed, Apollo the same. If she were on the tube I'd watch her. Wouldn't you?" she asked.

Then she started to tell him about a group show she hoped to be in. Harry nodded sagely, but as he did, an image began to tickle his memory.

That evening, just after ten, he walked home with a copy of Grave's *Greek Myths* under his arm. After dinner with an old friend, he had spent a few hours searching book stores until this caught his eye.

All seemed quiet on his block. No big job at the chop shop; salsa echoed softly inside the darkened garage. A few people sat on the front stairs of the community center. Drug activity was low. As Harry reached his door, he noticed a black Camaro across the street. The driver had a hawk nose and wore a baseball cap.

Despite the mildness of the night, a fire burned in the vacant lot beyond the car. Basic street sense should have told Harry not to look. But he gaped openly at the half dozen men and a woman outlined against the flames. Even by that light Harry recognized the undercover cop and his heart missed a beat. This felt scarier than love.

She didn't look his way. Then she spoke. Though she was too distant for Harry Sisk to hear, her words broke the quiet. As the men nodded, brakes squealed over on Avenue B, a woman yelled in Spanish, sirens wailed in the dark. By the time Harry got upstairs to his window, the lot was empty, the fire guttering, the cop, car, and driver gone.

Next day in the jury room Bobby noticed the Graves. "Oh-oh, Zeus and company. You should do that but update it. He can turn into a poodle instead of an eagle to get close to women. Any actor would sell his soul to do that."

"Cosby as Zeus," Serena said. "Bart Simpson as Pan. Oprah as Athena. Contemporary gods. I could do great sets."

Harry smiled. Something clicked in his brain.

Then Bobby asked, "Will you be auditioning?"

Harry smiled again and said, "Give me your credits."

That evening, he stood in the Players' rehearsal room and watched the workshop do Noah's Ark. Two women played each pair of animals in turn, two guys were Mr. and Mrs. Noah. Other actors were the Ark itself.

"We're on the right track," Harry told the director. Then he showed all of them a photo of Bernini's sculpture of Apollo and Daphne. Pursued by the god, she stared in open mouthed shock as her arms and hands turned into laurel branches. "Sudden, dramatic, scary," he said, "a mortal transformed by her contact with something alien." But this wasn't quite the image which tugged at Harry's memory.

That Friday, warm and drowsy, the start of the Memorial Day weekend, was the jury's final meeting. Harry sat between Serena and Bobby, skimmed a prose translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and ignored his companions.

A long pause occurred between cases. Jurors wondered if they were about to be dismissed. Harry was only half aware of the assistant DA, a nervous Italian kid telling them, "There's one last case we'd like you to hear. Class C narcotics."

Jurors grumbled. Then Bobby said, "It's the ice goddess again!" Harry looked up to see her staring past him and out the window as the foreman read the oath.

"Officer." The DA sounded like an intimidated kid. "I would like to direct your attention to the night of May 19 around ten P.M." Harry

realized that was the date and almost the exact time when he had last seen her.

"Yes."

Harry was fascinated by her unplaceable accent. Not Spanish, almost not European.

"And you were then at St. Nicholas Avenue and a Hundred and Thirty-Third?"

"Yes."

Harry tried not to show surprise.

"You met an individual there?"

"I called him Mr. Softee." The voice was clear, the accent tantalizing. "Because he looked soft and pale." A juror started to snicker, then choked. As she spoke of going to a building and buying crack, Harry gaped. Her beauty was without flaw.

"And you turned the drugs over to your backup?"

"Yes."

"And you saw the accused again about twenty minutes after that?"

"Yes."

"In the custody of your backup?"

"Yes."

Harry knew that everything she said was a lie, and couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"Thank you very much, Officer. Please stay available in case there are questions." He sounded as if he were pleading. Again she rose, crossed the room in a single fluid move, and was gone.

The arresting officer was the hawk-nosed guy who had been at the wheel of the car that night. He even wore the same baseball cap. Harry thought he looked furtive.

When the foreman asked for the last time if there were any comments, the little man with the red hair just said, "Let's just get it over with. Those two are obviously lying."

"But the ones they are arresting need arresting," the nurse said.

Harry and the little man were the only two who didn't vote to indict. After that they were dismissed for the last time. Everyone got up very quickly and started to leave. Bobby, looking desperate, handed Harry his credits. "I'll show it to the boss," Harry promised and stuck it in his book.

That evening, he and Serena exchanged phone numbers at the café in Little Italy. He noticed a lurking jumpiness in her hands and eyes and knew they spelled bad nights and awkward days for anyone who made the mistake of getting too close. He made a definite but unspecific promise to go to dinner at a place she knew in Chelsea and said good-bye for the last time.

Things were humming at the theater that night. The Creative Director was back from England. She had seen the same possibilities that Harry had in one little show he recommended. With his forewarning she had managed to snatch the New York rights out from under the nose of the Manhattan Theater Club.

That evening, she watched Harry talk to the workshop. "TV is the medium of our myths," he said. "That's where the archetypes reside. Think of Roseanne Arnold as the mother goddess, Candice Bergen as Minerva, goddess of wisdom, Bart Simpson as Pan. I see gods appearing on big television screens on stage. We'll make Diana, goddess of the hunt, into a TV cop. I saw a knockout woman who could play her. Unfortunately, she actually is a cop."

The actors laughed.

"As for the mortals," said Harry, "look at the kind of material they get." He held up the *Metamorphoses* and passed it around. On the cover was a photo of the image which had been tickling his memory. It showed an archaic sculpture of a man writhing in agony as antlers sprouted from the top of his head and dogs tore him apart.

He said, "That's Actaeon, a hunter who made the mistake of seeing the goddess Diana at a moment when she did not want to be seen. As punishment for something not the man's fault she transformed him into a stag and his own dogs turned on him."

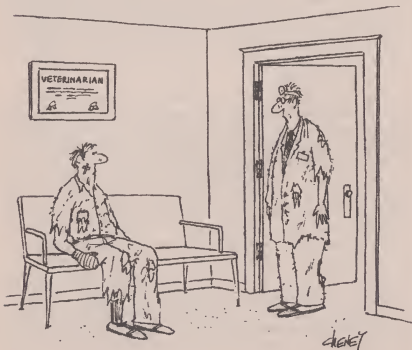
The Creative Director was impressed. "Let's have dinner tomorrow," she said afterward. "It's been a while!"

That night Harry took a cab home and thought about a possible production. It would look very nice on his resumé. Riding east he realized that he still had Bobby's skimpy credits in his jacket pocket. Serena's number was there too. Getting out of the cab, Harry crumpled the papers, tossed them in a trash barrel. His time on the jury hadn't been a total waste.

On the block, runners directed customers to the dealers. Down the street, guys wheeled a hot Caddy into the darkness of the garage. Lights burned in the cellar of the former church. A woman called her kids. On a boom box, CHILLIN' T stuttered his stuff. The lot across the street was dark and empty.

Harry opened the downstairs door and stepped into the hall. He saw Joey and Miguel and tried to say their names. Then he saw the knives, the dead-eyed stares, and started to back away.

On the stoop, Harry turned and yelled but not one of his neighbors looked his way. He ran but the knife boys caught him. Between two parked cars they severed a carotid artery. Falling, dying, he was aware only of gold-flecked eyes, their gaze beautiful, implacable, and unjust. *☞*



"Mr. Hargrove...we need to talk about your canary."



A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

VAULTS IN VACUUM

THE CENTRAL images of the 1968 classic film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* revolve about a mysterious message left in the form of a monolith buried on our moon. It had been waiting for millions of years for us to show sufficient ability to uncover it.

Soon after the space program began, scientists proposed sending messages aboard spacecraft. It's easy to see that a long-term message can survive in the high vacuum and isolation available beyond Earth — deep space equals deep time. But what should be the medium? And what should be the content of this message in a bottle?

The first concerted attempt to send a material message beyond Earth rode upon the first spacecraft to leave our solar system, Pioneers 10 and 11. Launched in 1971 and 1972 to fly by several outer planets,

each has support struts carrying a six-by-nine-inch gold-anodized aluminum plaque, which bears an etched drawing that describes some facts about our civilization. A sketch of two nude humans, greeting the infinite with a hopeful wave, became its best known feature.

In 1977 NASA launched the Voyager missions to the outer planets, each bearing an Interstellar Record created by a team including Carl Sagan, Frank Drake, and Jon Lomberg. The metal phonograph record carried both sights and sounds of Earth, from Gregorian chants and seagulls to Chuck Berry, and set the standard for broadly based, information-dense messages. Other small messages — a microdot of inscribed names on the Viking lander to Mars, and an honorary plaque on the failed Russian Phobos mission to Mars — added nothing new.

More than a decade passed before another substantial attempt. A CD-ROM disk flew on the Russian Mars '96 mission, which failed at launch and splashed into the Pacific Ocean.

I worked on the Mars '94 disk, bringing me into close touch with Jon Lomberg, a major player in the Voyager markers. His paintings adorn many books and exhibitions; his astronomically correct rendering of our galaxy greets visitors to the National Air and Space Museum.

Lomberg had an idea: put a message on the Cassini spacecraft bound for Saturn in 1997. This and my next two columns deal with designing such a message.

Lomberg had already enlisted the help of Carolyn Porco, a professor of astronomy at the University of Arizona, who promised to get such a message on the spacecraft. Porco was a brisk and efficient woman, a principal investigator on the Cassini imaging camera team.

Cassini was to be an anthology mission, with eighteen separate scientific instruments. It also carried a lander which would drop through the soupy atmosphere of Saturn's largest moon, Titan, and radio back data from the surface. A duplicate message might also fly

aboard the Huygens Probe lander (named for the discoverer of Titan), built by the European Space Agency. At 5,562 pounds the Cassini spacecraft would be the heaviest unmanned package ever launched into the solar system, except for the failed Mars '96 craft. With fuel, it weighed 12,470 pounds and was the last of the dinosaur generation of spacecraft, having accreted more experiments as the planning spiraled through many years. Under Daniel Goldin, NASA's approach had reversed to favoring "lighter, faster, cheaper" missions, and Cassini narrowly averted cancellation.

Including staff salaries and assuming it survives for five operating years in the Saturnian system, Cassini will cost 3.5 billion dollars. It is surely the last multipurpose mission to which teams of scientists glued their hopes and hardware as the mission consumed their careers. Astronomers exploring the outer solar system must deal with long flight times, but the repeated delays of Cassini meant that some of them would have only this single opportunity. After Cassini, missions will be quick, light, cheap — and politically stronger. NASA's extreme sensitivity to Congress grew from years of narrowly getting

Cassini past their skeptical eyes. The agency became risk-averse as the launch date approached, a fact that came to have great significance as the drama of the Cassini marker unfolded.

While we were working on the Cassini marker, the Mars '96 mission ended up in the Pacific Ocean. It failed to reach orbit because the Russian Proton booster misfired in its fourth rocket stage. Again, the craft was so heavy that a fourth stage was essential. Many experiments were lost, the Visions of Mars disk with them. There was some consolation that the disk may fly on a later Russian Mars mission.

Cassini is an implausibly fat spacecraft, so heavy that it has to undergo two gravity-assist flybys of Venus, and one each of Earth and Jupiter. Arriving at Saturn late in 2004, it will fire an onboard rocket to brake it into the first of some six dozen orbits during its planned four-year tour. Shortly after arrival, the Huygens lander will separate and plunge into the chilly, hazy-brown atmosphere of Titan.

Apparently Titan has at least one continent, perhaps jutting up from chilly seas of liquid hydrocarbons like ethane. Organically rich, its atmosphere is thicker at the surface than Earth's, but at tempera-

tures around -170 Centigrade. No one has any good idea of what such frigid chemistry could produce, over the four billion years Titan has orbited Saturn.

In November of 1994 Lomberg and I wrote to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), who were assembling the spacecraft. As with Mars '94, we suggested attaching an existing small package, the Microelectronics and Photonics Exposure experiment (MAPEX), plus a message. Lomberg thought adding MAPEX might make the marker more salable. We tried to hawk the idea with the usual positives:

- increasing public awareness of the mission, as the Pioneer plaque did, through an optimistic, imaginative goal.
- educating a broad public about the lander, Titan's strange chemistry, and the problems of communicating across long time scales.

The eventual audience could be humanity centuries hence, or on a far longer time scale, any lifeforms that evolve in the organic soup of Titan. We would not imply that Titan bears life now, but would allow for later evolution. We

sketched out the plausible readers, ranging from our distant heirs (1000 to 100,000 years) to aliens, including possible Titanians, on scales of a million to billions of years.

Porco came to UCI and we three spent days brainstorming design ideas over lunches and dinners. Much scientific work proceeds like this, sighting in on the critical problems, then using the skills of each team member to attack them. Such free-for-alls are one of the best aspects of scientific collaboration, spirited and enjoyable. They are quite the opposite of how other creative people work, as in the classic image of solitary, agonized artists.

Labor and material costs were to be kept low. We thought the message-bearer should probably be an "artificial fossil" embedded in hard glass which could survive Titan's weather. The message would thus outlast the lander by far.

Unlike the wandering Voyager strategy, we could shape our message for a specific place, Saturn and Titan. We could include information about the present solar system (which cannot be seen in visible light through Titan's thick atmosphere) and our place in it. Communicating this in clear, unambiguous ways promised to be an imaginative intellectual exercise, raising

interwoven cultural and scientific issues of wide interest. We would aim to be "understandable, optimistic and awe-inspiring."

JPL said they would submit the idea through the usual channels; Carolyn Porco promised to hurry it along.

Mulling over the huge time scales a week later, I realized that Titan's frigid weathering and the lacerating forces the orbiter would meet around Saturn suggested a message medium of great durability.

Engineers estimated the orbiter would remain intact in orbit for roughly a century, while the Huygens lander could be buried by the flows of sluggish, cold fluids within decades. These were very crude projections, given Titan's unknown weather. In both environments, diamond would preserve a message against abrasion better than metals.

To me the best candidate appeared to be a thin, single-crystal diamond disk to write upon. Using a jewel to carry a message across a billion years could delight the mind, as well.

Manufacturing a disk bigger than a nickel would be expensive. And how to write on the hardest of all substances? At first I thought of using writing processes I knew, such

as a layer of boron inside the sheet, laid down using a template and chemical vapor deposition.

The utility of this approach lay in its simplicity, readability, and the unequaled rugged properties of single diamond crystals. Diamond is robust, strong, inert, and resists abrasion. Only very high temperatures and aggressive oxides can damage it. Further, it is transparent in the visible spectrum and a broad range of the infrared.

Many spacecraft use diamond windows for their infrared sensors and its space-rated properties are well known. On Titan, infrared is probably the preferred range for best visibility. Diamond has no known chemical reaction with substances in the Titan atmosphere.

Construction of the marker would begin with purchase of an industrial diamond plate, polished, about one mm thick. My discussions with the leading diamond firm, DeBeers, proved this was not a routine request, but they could make such diamond disks for about \$5000 each. Since cost scales quickly with size, maximum diameter would be at most a few centimeters.

Writing a microscopic message into the planes of a diamond would

probably be attractive to the general audience, I thought, much as the gold-plated Voyager disk proved eye-catching. Indeed, DeBeers seemed interested in the jewelry angle as a possible new market: wear the Cassini Medallion! At perhaps \$30,000 or more, this would be a very high end item.

Lomberg, Porco, and I visited JPL and spoke with the flight engineers and managers, with Porco fielding this proposal in Europe. The jewel message notion seemed to catch the attention of even skeptical engineers. We had approval within a month. The European Space Agency also liked the idea and agreed to carry a diamond disk on the Huygens lander.

Word came to me late in the evening, by telephone from a jubilant Lomberg. I walked outside and viewed the stars, thinking of the marker as a sort of memorial for all the scientific community, and indeed, for our era. The sheer joy of it made it difficult for me to speak. I remembered that awe is a blending of wonder and fear, and realized whence my fear came. The time scales of astronomy imply the mortality of those who study it. No less does designing a message which could not be read until all its designers are dust. The night sky filled

me with a chilly awe in a way it never had before.

I went back inside and set to work. Soon enough, consultation with DeBeers converged upon a disk 2.8 centimeters across, a millimeter thick and weighing 4.3 grams. Each spacecraft would carry the same message. Though we had two years until the diamond disk had to be attached to the spacecraft and lander, there were myriad engineering and conceptual issues to resolve.

We wished to build on the Voyager experience, extending their thinking. As with Voyager, NASA reserved the right to veto us or even drop the marker entirely. When Voyager design ideas leaked to the press in 1977, NASA's official posture was that they had made no final decision on the project at all.

Still, this did not protect from public vitriol the makeshift team making the Voyager record. Shadowy rumors emerged at the United Nations, when they tried to get diplomats to record verbal greetings to go on the record. Some felt Voyager should carry depictions of war, poverty, and disease, and that a best-foot-forward approach was a sunny half-truth.

Early on the designers had decided to avoid explicit depiction of religion, lest they ignore some. Afterward, others questioned whether the team's belief in the scientific method and use of it to convey much of the message was not itself a sort of ideology. Editorials in the British press had demanded that any future messages be crafted by a large international ecumenical assortment of scientists and nonspecialists alike.

We three had no liking for such an unwieldy opera of interests. NASA agreed; we would design and deliver a disk, following solely our own judgment and paying the cost ourselves.

Before beginning, we had to assume that our future readers could indeed read. Brains often must decipher the visual world from ambiguous, ill-defined data. Like many other animals, we make educated guesses about what lies behind our sometimes chaotic environment. Evolution has shaped our brains to create models of the world that mesh well with our learned reality.

At least a third of our approximately hundred thousand genes are exclusively involved in brain function, and many of those relate to sight. We use a strategy of storing a perception across many neurons,

much as TV sets break images into pixels.

This method is like the great Rose Bowl prank of 1961, when Caltech students stole the coding sheets for the University of Washington's mass card display. The students then doctored these and returned them to the hotel safe where they were stored. No Washington fan knew the message beforehand, so none could tell that anything was wrong. Each Washington fan knew only to hold up his white or black card, following written orders handed out at the game. When the stadium crowd held aloft their cards, they spelled CALTECH. The next image in this little half-time entertainment was of the Caltech beaver, not the Washington Husky.

Like the fans, our neurons know nothing. But parallel processing of their individual minute signals, carried up through hierarchies of neural organization, eventually constructs a model of what the eye is seeing. The brain uses this image in making evolutionarily effective calculations and decisions.

For example, if we paint dots on a hollow glass cylinder and view it with one eye, it looks like a random set of two-dimensional dots. But turn it and — aha! — the three-

dimensional shape of the glass pops out, a whole three-dimensional picture. Our brain generates this from a mere bit of motion, a talent of great use in the African veldt long ago. Similarly, stereo vision enables our brains to take the small differences in the angles that objects make and decode them into distance estimates.

All this processing plays out behind the sets of our internal, unitary world. We had to assume our future audience would have such abilities as well, but perhaps not exactly ours.

Voyager's messages had embodied the idea that the aesthetic properties of human art (especially music, since they were sending a record) emerged from physical constants and nature's mathematical harmonies. Intelligences of the far future, springing from physical circumstances at least partially shared with us, might well appreciate underlying ideas based on natural order. Lomberg speculated that highly ordered structures like fugues and geometric constructions might come through best.

Conventions of perspective and the entire problem of interpreting two-dimensional representations loomed large. Even those humans whose cultures do not use perspec-

tive have to learn how to see it. Dogs never do learn. What of humans evolved in a far future? Or even aliens?

It had always seemed to me that evolutionary mechanisms should select for living forms that respond to nature's underlying simplicities. Of course, it is difficult to know in general just what simple patterns the universe has. In a sense they may be like Plato's perfect forms, the geometric constructions such as the circle and polygons, which supposedly we see in their abstract perfection with our mind's eye, but in the actual world are only approximately realized. Thinking further in like fashion, we can sense simple, elegant ways of viewing dynamical systems, calling forth ideas of the irreducibly elementary.

Imagine a primate ancestor for whom the flight of a stone, thrown after fleeing prey, was a complicated matter, hard to predict. It could try a hunting strategy using stones or even spears, but with limited success, because complicated curves are hard to understand. A cousin who saw in the stone's flight a simple and graceful parabola would have a better chance of predicting where it would fall. The cousin would eat more often and presumably reproduce more as well.

Neural wiring could reinforce this behavior by instilling a sense of genuine pleasure at the sight of an artful parabola.

We descend from that appreciative cousin. Baseball outfielders learn to sense a ball's deviations from its parabolic descent, due to air friction and wind, because they are building on mental processing machinery finely tuned to the problem. Other appreciations of natural geometric ordering could emerge from hunting maneuvers on flat plains, from the clever design of simple tools, and the like. We all share an appreciation for the beauty of simplicity, a sense emerging from our origins.

In an academic paper, R. Lemarchand and Jon Lomberg had argued in detail that symmetries and other aesthetic principles should be truly universal, because they arise from fundamental physical properties. Aliens orbiting distant stars will still spring from evolutionary forces that reward a deep, automatic understanding of the laws of mechanics.

Many things in nature, inanimate and living, show bilateral, radial, concentric, and other mathematically based symmetries. Our rectangular houses, football fields, and books spring from engineering

constraints, their beauty arising from necessity. We appreciate the curve of a suspension bridge, intuitively sensing the urgencies of gravity and tension.

Radial symmetry appears in the mandala patterns of almost every human culture, from Gothic stone-works to Chinese rugs. Perhaps they echo the sun's glare flattened into two dimensions. In all cultures, small flaws in strict symmetries express artful creativity. As Lemarchand and Lomberg note, the universe itself began with a Big Bang that can be envisioned as a four-dimensional symmetric expansion; yet "without some flaws, so-called anisotropies, in the symmetry of the Big Bang, galaxies and stars would never have appeared."

A less obvious mathematical underpinning expresses itself in forms as diverse as the chambered nautilus, flower petals and galaxies. Draw three diagonals in a pentagon, and the intersections divide the lines in a ratio, $1/2(1+5^{1/2}) = 1.61803...$ The ancient Greeks noticed that this "Golden Section" in geometry emerged in many strikingly different ways. The human eye finds its echo pleasing in our own buildings; the Greeks used this.

When its pediment was intact, the Parthenon fit exactly into a

rectangle with this ratio of sides. This proportion was first discovered by the Greek mathematician Pythagoras 2500 years ago; the sculptor Phidias used it. The United Nations building in New York City is proportioned as three stacked Parthenons.

Natural philosophers noticed that this number also appears in a famous sequence, the Fibonacci series (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21...), which nature favors as well. Arrived at simply by summing the previous two entries in the sequence, this pattern appears in the branching pattern of trees, in the number of petals in the iris, primrose, and daisy, and in many other flowers. Pinecones, pineapples and sunflowers display overlapping clockwise and counter-clockwise patterns, their florets in the ratio of successive Fibonacci numbers, such as 21:34 in the sunflower. The Golden Section emerges when one takes the ratio of two successive terms; the higher these terms are, the nearer their ratio to 1.61803...

The Golden Section emerges from spirals by drawing perpendicular lines connecting different parts of the curve. The ratio of the lengths of adjacent lines is a close approximation to 1.6180... The spiral of the chambered nautilus follows the

Golden Section, as do the curves of seashells and animal horns. Apparently the necessities of strong structures built from minimal materials force such underlying choices to emerge from the pressures of evolution. Growing in a fixed proportion does not shift the center of gravity, so balance problems do not develop.

Quite different physics generates the spiral waves in galaxies, yet in many these curves too express the Golden Section, sometimes also called the logarithmic spiral. The Golden Section lives in flowers, trees and galaxies, giving pattern to our entire universe, yet known only to a few of us hominids.

To those who have not had their sense of mathematics squashed by the mechanical drills of elementary school, the subject can burn with a peculiar rich intensity. Would aliens (or even further evolved humans) "see" the same mathematical underpinnings to our universe?

Strategies for the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, SETI, have assumed this since their beginnings in the early 1960s. Many supposed that interesting properties such as the prime numbers, which do not appear in nature, would figure in schemes to send

messages by radio. A case for the universality of mathematics is in turn an argument for the universality of aesthetic principles: evolution would shape all of us to the general contours of physical reality. The specifics could differ enormously, of course, as a glance at the odd creatures in our fossil record shows.

Our prospect was daunting. Many mathematical paths beckoned. For example, was there a way to embed in our message the compact equation

$$e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$$

which links the most important constants in the whole of mathematical analysis, 0, 1, e , π and i ? The equation looked beautiful to me, a "math type" as my wife dryly noted, but such types comprise a tiny audience even among humans.

What's more, we could not even find a clear way (independent of many assumptions about notation) to write the equation. Any writing scheme called upon human symbols. Such points stumped us. After all, philosophers of mathematics have argued over whether a mathematical object, like "9," is independent of human thought, or not. Some hold that it is neither exter-

nal nor internal but social. This means mathematical ideas arise from our interactions with each other. Then a theorem known solely to its inventor does not in some sense even exist as mathematics until someone else understands it. Plates are round, an objective fact, but mathematical roundness is a human construction.

Perhaps. But all three views — mathematics is objective and real; it arises from an internal set of preconceptions; it is social — ignore biology, which brought about humans themselves through evolution. How general were our adaptations to our world?

How to decide such fundamental points? Our imaginations yearned to soar but momentarily stalled. In the end, we retreated to our sense of beauty.

Further difficulties arose in areas I had naively thought were straightforward. How to depict our

solar system? To use mathematical universals, even once identified? How about the data processing assumptions behind recovering three-dimensionality through two-dimensional projections? How universal could be the use of scientific diagrams, our design of mathematical symbols, and the use of photos of humans?

All involved standing at a conceptual distance from ourselves, reaching for a more general way of seeing the world. But how firmly could we believe arguments from our own sense of beauty?

This rather deep question, along with more work on the Cassini message, I shall take up in next month's column.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. email: gbenford@uci.edu



Richard Paul Russo's collaboration with Wayne Wightman, "The Idiot's Dream," ran in last December's issue; his last solo appearance here was "The Open Boat" back in 1991. A resident of Seattle, he is the author of such novels as Destroying Angel, Subterranean Gallery, Carlucci's Edge, and most recently Carlucci's Heart. Those last three books were all finalists for the Philip K. Dick Award and Subterranean Gallery was a winner.

Hallucinatory and gripping, "Butterflies" shows why Russo's books have won such accolades.

Butterflies

By Richard Paul Russo

THE HEAT WAS KILLING HIM. There was the chatter of monkeys, buzz of flies; a long sharp caw. Water flowed somewhere nearby, falling over stones.

Mason stumbled out of the trees and into a clearing. A cloud of blue and white butterflies rose from the moss at his feet, fluttering about his face, momentarily blinding him. When the butterflies cleared away, he saw a hut on the other side of the clearing. Mason was certain the hut hadn't been there a moment ago.

He crossed the clearing, squinting against the glare and the heat of the sun. Dead vines hung from the roof of the hut, trailed across the open doorway and the single window. Mason climbed the two steps and pushed through the vines. The hut was empty, and even hotter than outside.

Mason came back out of the hut. It was late afternoon, he was exhausted and thirsty, and he wondered if he should search for the water he heard. Chances were good it would be gone by the time he reached it, or it would turn out to be something completely useless that just sounded

like flowing water. Mason shook his head, deciding no. He was too tired for that.

He moved around the hut to the side shaded from the sun and lay on the soft carpet of thick, green moss, his back against the hut wall. The noise around him steadily increased — birds shrieked, animals snorted, insects cracked and whirred. Something like the beat of drums vibrated up to him through the moss. Mason closed his eyes and slept.

He did not know where he was, and only barely knew *who* he was. If he was still on Earth, it was a part of Earth unlike any he had ever known or heard of — a place where, it seemed, physical laws were regularly defied. He knew his name, but almost nothing else about himself. His past was gone.

He did not know how to get it back.

When he woke it was morning. Mason lay on his back and gazed up at the sky above him. A thick, orange haze obscured all signs of the sun, or perhaps the sun was not yet high enough to be seen. The heat was already stifling. The sound of flowing water was louder now, and his thirst had become painful.

He heard the crackling static of a radio. He glanced up at the roof, saw a long thin antenna projecting from the peak. Now this is interesting, he thought. He struggled to his feet and walked into the hut.

A large radio set rested on a wooden table next to the window. The static emerged from a set of headphones lying beside the radio. A single chair stood in front of the table.

Mason sat at the table and studied the radio. The controls were simple, though unmarked — ancient round analog knobs and dials. He found the volume, turned it down, put the headset over his ears, then slowly brought the volume back up. Nothing but static. He moved a hand to the tuning dial and turned it.

Music faded in, faint, then faded out immediately. Mason fiddled with the dial, trying to bring in the station. He caught it for a few moments — a Latin beat, guitars and mandolins and percussion, a hint of a voice singing in Spanish. Something vaguely familiar about it, for a moment he almost thought he understood the Spanish words. Something about

flowers? Then it dissolved into a squealing burst of static. Mason tried to tune it back in, but couldn't find it again. He continued up the frequencies.

He found nothing else except a few tiny gaps of real silence amidst the static. He switched bands, though he had no idea which bands he was switching to or from.

A voice. Crackle of static, then another voice. He feathered the dial, turned up the volume. He was picking up a conversation, two people radioing to each other. Then it came through loud and clear.

"...your position now?"

"Hell, I don't know. We're in the middle of a goddamn swamp. Hold on a minute." Static. "Dingo says we're in Foxtrot Abel, four-oh-three dash three niner."

"Fine, just fine, Torelli. You're headed right for him."

A flutter went through Mason's stomach, rose to push against his heart. He knew, somehow, that they were trying to find him. Whoever they were.

"Roger that and out, Sorcerer."

The static returned. Mason took a stone and scratched a mark on the frequency display. He would have to keep track of their progress. And when they closed in on him, then what?

He had no idea.

Dark, heavy clouds roiled in overhead, almost instantly blotting out the sun and bringing darkness to the hut, and within seconds a drenching downpour crashed down. Mason scrambled to his feet.

Rain. Water. How could he catch it? Or would he have to stand out in the rain with his head tilted back and mouth open like a baby bird? He looked around the hut, and there on the table, beside the radio, was a large, open gourd. He picked it up and discovered it was already full. Of course. He brought the gourd to his mouth and drank the cold, clean water. When he could drink no more, the gourd was still full. Of course again. And when the rain eventually stopped, the gourd would probably be empty.

Feeling bloated, Mason set the gourd on the table, then sat in the chair in front of the radio. He looked at the headset; nothing but a steady hiss emerged from it. Overhead, the rain was a pounding clutter on the metal roof panels, drowning out all sounds of the jungle.

Dusk fell, then night, and the rain did not let up. Mason remained in the chair, dozing, the clattering rain and radio hiss a soothing background now. Fragmented, unformed dream images flitted in and out of his mind.

A break in the radio's hiss brought him awake. Mason grabbed for the headset and put it over his ears.

"...ing Sorcerer."

"Torelli, this is Sorcerer. Status report."

"Status is all screwed up, you want the truth. We're still in the goddamn swamp and now we're being hit by a monsoon. And this afternoon we lost Polk."

"Lost him?"

"Yeah. Stepped into some kind of hole, went down, never came up. We're down to five now."

"But you're making progress, yes?"

"Yeah, Dingo says. She's got us on a straight-line to the target. But at this rate it'll take us weeks to get to him."

"Don't worry, Torelli. The swamp ends soon, and the weather will improve."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I guarantee it. By morning, the rain will stop."

"Hope you're right, Sorcerer."

"I'm right, Torelli. Count on it."

"Okay. Roger and out, Sorcerer."

"And out, Torelli."

The static returned. Mason removed the headset, set it beside the radio. He got up from the chair and walked to the open doorway. A faint phosphorescence seemed to illuminate the jungle around him, limning the downpour, outlining the trees. Mason stood there a long time, watching.

In the morning the rain stopped, the sky cleared, and water steamed up from the jungle floor. Mason watched the steam rise, then walked out into it, like moving through hot, insubstantial clouds. Out in the trees, he searched for fruit to eat, and picked several different types before returning to the hut.

He tried them all, though none of them tasted particularly good. A few

minutes after he'd finished eating, his stomach began to cramp, but nothing worse happened. The really bad effects, he guessed, would come later. Mason stared at the radio for some time, listening to the static coming from the headset, then turned and walked out of the hut.

He would not stay here and wait for them. He would strike out into the jungle and keep going — either toward those closing in on him, or away from them. It didn't matter. He would escape, or force the issue. Either was preferable to waiting.

Mason gazed up at the rising sun glowing a deep hot orange above the treetops. East, he decided. He glanced back at the hut for a moment, then pushed into the jungle.

Progress was slow, the undergrowth dense between the huge trunks of the primary trees. He lost sight of the sun almost immediately, but caught occasional glimpses of it through fleeting breaks in the canopy high above him. Water dripped steadily from the thick leaves and branches, keeping him hot and wet.

He heard animal sounds of all kinds — the harsh squawking of birds, the yowling of monkeys, snuffling and crashing of larger creatures moving through the undergrowth around him, the high-pitched roaring of big cats — but it wasn't long before he realized he never actually saw any of the animals. Mason searched the shifting light and shadow of the trees and ferns and creepers all around him, tried focusing on the sounds, the cries and calls, but never saw the bird or monkey or whatever creature called out. Once he saw a huge beetle, shiny metallic blue and green, antennae shivering; it worked its way across a fallen tree, clicking as it moved. But there was nothing else.

Several hours later, Mason emerged from the trees and into an empty clearing. A cloud of blue and white butterflies rose from the ground and surrounded his head, momentarily blinding him. When the butterflies cleared, he saw the hut on the other side of the clearing, long antenna dipping slightly in a breeze he could not feel.

After waiting several hours without success for a radio transmission from the people closing in on him, Mason gave up and tried to find the radio station playing cantina music. He sat at the table with the headset on and the volume up, switching bands and gently moving through the

frequencies. Once, he was able to tune in to something that sounded like the crashing of metal against metal with a heavy thrumming background, but he couldn't tell if it was the sound of machinery, or some harsh industrial music. Whatever it was, it sounded familiar, and he almost thought he could place it, but then the station began flickering in and out, and finally disappeared altogether.

Eventually, though, Mason found the other station, or something very much like it. Latin music, definitely. Congas, mandolin, acoustic guitar, maybe a marimba? The station threatened to fade away, he adjusted the tuner, bringing it back; it faded again, he adjusted; fade, adjust, fade, adjust, concentrating intently on it as it fluttered in and out, like a fish trying to escape while he kept reeling it back in. And then he finally locked in, solid, the signal coming through clear and sharp. Cranked up the volume. A woman singing in Spanish, a song about love and guns and the hot sun beating down on the world.

Suddenly Mason was in a cantina; in Mexico, he thought, on the coast, a hot night, the light of glassed candles at the tables. He stood in a narrow corridor, by a cigarette machine, empty beer bottles on top of the machine. The music came from small speakers nailed to the dark ceiling beams. The aroma of frying fish filled the room. A heavyset man stood behind the bar, sweating and gazing out across the cantina, and an older woman in red and black served drinks to the few customers — an old man in the corner drinking tequila; a young couple by the window with margaritas; and a stocky middle-aged man just two tables from Mason, leaning back against the wall and drinking from a dark, long-necked beer bottle. The man caught sight of Mason and stared at him, his expression hard and tight.

Mason had been here before, he knew that, and he had seen that man now staring at him. And he knew, somehow, that the man had been waiting for him to show up. The man leaned forward and started to stand, and Mason knew the man was going to come after him.

But the man never got the chance. The cantina floor heaved and shook, like a huge whipping earthquake. Mason was thrown against the cigarette machine, he reached out to catch his balance, grabbed a beer bottle; the ground shook again and he fell, the bottle breaking in his hands and his head cracking against the cantina wall. Silver and red crisscrossed his vision and he reached out for support, pulled himself up.

When his vision cleared, he found himself on the floor of the hut, gripping the table with one hand, a piece of broken beer bottle in his bleeding other hand. The headset dangled from his neck. The cantina was gone.

Mason pulled himself back up onto the chair, his heart beating hard against his ribs. He set the broken glass on the table, then put the headset on again. The signal was gone. He turned the tuning dial back and forth, but could not pull it back in. Mason smiled to himself, staring at the piece of brown, broken glass. He knew he would find the station again. Or something even better. And next time he would be prepared.

MORNING CAME HARD and bright and hot. Mason stumbled from the hut, blinking against the glare of the sun slicing in at him across the treetops. He was woozy — partly from the heat, partly from hunger, but mostly from thirst. The gourd had been empty since the rainstorm had ended, and he'd found no other source of water.

He stood in the clearing, gazing into the trees and fighting the dizziness, when a chunk of memory fell on him from out of the sun: a woman curled up in a rattan chair, long hair covering most of her face, one foot bare. Then more of the memory surfaced: His own hands gently pulling back the hair to see open, lifeless eyes and a small strange puncture in the woman's temple. The woman. Alexandra.

Mason staggered back to the hut, sat on the steps and leaned against the door frame, rustling the dead vines. Alexandra. The pain clawed his gut and tore at his chest, a creature trying to rip its way out of his body. The pain was terrible, and what made it even worse, and frightening, was that he had no idea who she was. He knew her name, he knew that he had loved her, and he knew she was dead, but he knew nothing else. Who was she, really? How had he come to know her? How long had he known her? Were they lovers? Married? He just did not know. All he knew was the grief and pain the knowledge of her death gave him.

Mason breathed slowly, deeply, easing away the pain until it was little more than a dull ache. Then he stood, weaving slightly for a few moments. Almost numb, Mason stepped away from the hut and headed into the jungle.

He crashed through thick undergrowth, keeping hands and arms up to protect his face. He didn't know where he was going, and he didn't care. He'd had it with all this — his past gone, then coming back to him in pieces, almost worse than having no memory at all. And now this, his memory of Alexandra — incomplete, not even close to being whole, more pain than anything else. He just wanted it to end.

He stumbled over a fallen branch, caught himself, then tripped again, over a jutting rock, and fell forward, his face almost plunging into a clear stream bubbling along over moss-covered stones.

Mason pushed up to his hands and knees and stared at the water. Another goddamn illusion, he was sure of it. But he was so thirsty, his body parched. He reached out with one hand, and lowered it into the stream.

Water. Cold and wet, real water. Mason crouched forward, filled cupped hands with the cold, clear water, and drank.

He drank again and again, he splashed water onto his face, over his head, and drank again. If the stream had been big enough he would have taken off all his clothes and gone in, but it wasn't deep or wide enough to even lie in. So he drank and poured water over himself until all his clothes were wet and he was completely bloated.

Mason lay on his back beside the stream and gazed up into the thick canopy of leaves and branches above him. He listened to the burbling sounds of the water, and the steady background of noises from animals he wasn't even sure existed. Closing his eyes, he soaked in the heat drying his clothes, and let all feeling leak out of him.

Mason woke beside the stream. Night had fallen. He sat up, barely able to see the reflections of the water flowing past him. The air was quiet and still, almost suffocating. He crawled forward and drank again.

He still remembered no more of Alexandra, the woman he was sure he loved, the woman he had found, dead, curled up in a rattan chair. The grief was a strange, numb ache echoing through him.

Mason stood, listening to the hot night. Things were coming to a head, he decided. This entire mess, whatever it was, would resolve here, one way or another. The people tracking him would find the hut and the clearing, they would find him, and he would somehow escape them, or he would die.

If he wanted any real chance to escape, he needed to know more than he did. He needed his memories, he needed his past.

He turned away from the stream and pushed through the jungle. He could not see where he was going, and he had no sense of direction, but he was sure it didn't matter. No matter what direction he followed, he would eventually come out in the clearing, he was certain of that.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, he did. There were no butterflies, but the hut was there, roof panels shimmering in the moonlight.

Mason stopped halfway across the clearing and stared at the reflected moonlight. Another memory twisted up inside him, jammed into place.

A recent memory. He crouched in shadow on a rooftop, full moon lighting half of the alley below him. He was silent and still, watching and listening. Scraping sounds came from the darkened part of the alley, and Mason saw a huge, vague shadow against shadow moving toward the light, and he was suddenly afraid, very afraid...

The memory ended. He knew there was more to it, but it remained lost to him. Mason shook himself. He needed the radio.

He hurried into the hut, sat at the table, put on the headphones. First he switched to the band and frequency being used by the squad tracking in on him. Cranked up the volume.

"...goddamn, Sorcerer, where are you? Sorcerer, this is Torelli, come in!"

"Torelli, this is Sorcerer."

"Where the hell have you been? We've been trying to get through to you for over an hour."

"A technical problem, Torelli. It doesn't concern you. Now, what's your status?"

"We're dug in for the night. Just too dark to go on, especially with no moon..."

(No moon? Mason wondered how that could be? Was he wrong about these people? No, he knew he wasn't.)

"...Dingo figures six, seven hours to contact. We should have him by mid-afternoon tomorrow. If he's still there."

"He's still there, Torelli. You can count on it."

"Christ, I hope so. This has been one hell of a mission."

"It's your job, Torelli."

There was a long, crackling pause. "Yeah, I guess." Another pause, shorter, then, "We'll be in touch tomorrow morning when we move out."

"No, Torelli, make that a negative. I don't want to hear from you until the target has been terminated."

Another long pause. Mason felt sick at the word.

"All right, Sorcerer. This is your show. Roger that and out."

And the crackling static returned.

Mason sat without moving, listening. Tomorrow. One way or another, it would be over tomorrow.

But there was still time before they arrived. Mason switched bands and began slowly sliding through the frequencies. Almost immediately, something, a dip in the static. Then it was gone. He went back, adjusted carefully, but couldn't find it. Further on, a whisper, a voice whispering rapidly but so quietly he couldn't make out a single word. Then it, too, was gone.

Sweat collected under the headphones, dripped from his hair, his eyebrows, stinging his eyes. Mason stared at the dials, the lights, as if they would somehow tell him what he should do, where on the bands he should go. His fingers trembled with the strain.

There. Something. A faint banging, metal on pipes. It faded, but he feathered the tuner, pulling it back in. Jumped up the volume, tapped, tapped at the dial...and there! He had it.

A deep, heavy thrumming vibrated the headphones, the bones of his skull. Mason closed his eyes, trying to imagine himself in the middle of the thrumming. Then a steady clanging of metal against metal came in, pipe against pipe, something like that. And through it all, just at the edge of his hearing, an oscillating hiss, fading in and out, occasionally surging to the foreground before retreating to the edges.

And then Mason was there.

He stood in a vast, dimly lit chamber, surrounded by enormous machines that cast huge shadows. The ceiling was high, nearly invisible — maybe forty or fifty feet above him. Water dripped steadily, invisible but somewhere nearby, the dripping sounds echoing from the walls and floors and ceiling of stone and metal. A string of chains hung from the nearest machine, silent and unmoving, breaking up silvery blue light coming from a recess in the stone wall behind it.

His breath was a dissipating fog, and he shivered from the cold. The deep thrumming continued, and he felt the slight vibrations of it through his shoes. The clanking and banging of pipes had ceased when he had first appeared, but now it started up again, though distant and muted. Lights flickered on a squat, bulky machine across the chamber, and a high-pitched whine erupted from it. Then the whine and lights faded, and the machine became still again.

Mason had been here before, like the cantina — he knew this place.

Something fluttered in the air above him, a flapping shadow. A bat, he thought. But when the thing dove toward him, and he ducked away from it, he was almost overcome by a wash of heat in its wake, and the stink of rotting flesh. It climbed into the darkness and disappeared.

Mason stepped around the machine with the hanging chains and moved slowly forward, his legs weak, so weak, searching the shadows, the narrow shafts of light. He was almost certain he wasn't alone, he felt he was being watched, perhaps studied.

Mason knew, suddenly, that this was the last place he'd been before waking up in the jungle. This was the last place he'd had his own memories, the last place he'd had his life. But he still could not remember what had happened to him here.

The bat-thing came at him again, diving from the darkness above. Mason dropped to a crouch and put up his arm in defense. The bat-thing slashed by, made contact with his arm, and Mason almost cried out with the burning pain. The bat-thing fluttered off, awkward and slow now, and Mason looked at his arm in the dim blue light. Across his forearm was a narrow, red streak of blistered skin, maybe four or five inches long. No blood, but plenty of pain.

He returned to the machine with the hanging chains, managed to unhook one of them, a section of thick metal links about six feet long and heavy. Mason doubled the chain, hooked it together, then backed away with one end gripped in his right hand, the metal clinking faintly as he moved. He might be signaling his location, but at least he wasn't defenseless.

He worked his way through the machines, in and out of shadows, slashes and pools of blue-white light. The light came from screened pale lamps recessed in the stone walls at apparently random locations and

heights. Another machine came to life behind him with a loud roar and a rapid banging, only to quit after little more than a minute. Mason kept on.

The chamber widened, then angled off to the side. Mason came around the corner, saw a metal stairway bolted to the wall and leading up to a narrow catwalk which fronted two metal doors set in the stone wall. This was what he wanted, what he had been looking for the first time he had come here. But why? What had he been searching for, exactly?

He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, searching the shadows around him, the air above. He spotted the water, dripping out of a pipe that emerged from the wall high above the floor and then falling into a metal cistern. But there were no other signs of movement, and the bat-thing seemed to have disappeared for good. Mason grabbed the metal railing with his free hand and started up the stairway.

The stairway shook with each step, and he wondered if the whole thing — stairway and catwalk both — was going to rip out of the stone and crash to the floor below, taking him with it. But he'd come too far to turn back now.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he paused again before moving along the catwalk. The first door was about ten feet along the catwalk, the second maybe twenty feet further on. Mason walked slowly forward, trying to remain silent, though he couldn't manage it. His footsteps were quiet, but the catwalk clanked and groaned with every movement.

He stopped in front of the first door, the catwalk swaying slightly beneath him, and adjusted his grip on the chain. Then he grabbed the door knob, turned it, and pulled.

The door swung easily and silently open. Behind the door was a large room lit by strips of blue phosphor laid across the ceiling. Inside the room were half a dozen antique filing cabinets, rotting cardboard boxes, wooden crates, a couple of metal desks and secretarial chairs, and two ancient, dark green metal footlockers. Files and papers and books were scattered everywhere. And sitting on one of the footlockers, looking directly at him, was a woman wearing shock armor and holding a disruptor aimed at his chest.

Mason knew her. Or at least he had, when he'd had all his memories. He had known her here in this place, in this room.

"We figured you'd be back," the woman said. It was, he realized, the

voice of Sorcerer. "We were closing in on you, but we thought, if we lost you, you'd be back here someday. And we'd be waiting. I'm surprised, though, to see you back here so soon." She glanced around the room, at the open cabinets, the crates that had been torn apart. "What is it you're looking for?" the woman asked. "What is it that's so important?"

Mason didn't answer. He couldn't have even if he'd wanted to. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"We'd hoped the memory loss would have lasted longer," the woman said, shrugging. She looked at the chain in Mason's hand and grinned. "But you still must be suffering from concussion if you come back here armed only with that." She shook her head. "I have to credit you, though, Mason. You managed to blind jump away from us, with no memory and with a neural distorter patched into you. None of us would have thought that possible." She gave a brief nod. "You won't pull that off again."

He should know what she was talking about. It was vaguely familiar, and it sounded right, but he didn't understand a damn thing she was saying.

"Not too smart, coming back here like this. You can't jump again for days, except to boomerang, and we're closing in on you there. We've got you, my friend. We've got you."

Maybe so, Mason thought. But she was sure wrong about some things. With hardly a thought, he stepped forward and swung the chain at the woman. She was caught by surprise, but still managed to get her arm up in time, save her head. The chain crashed against the shock armor; he pulled it back and swung again. She fired the disruptor at him, his whole body spasmed, and the end of the chain whipped harmlessly past her body. But Mason managed to keep his fist clenched, managed to keep his grip on the chain.

The woman fired again, his chest seemed to explode, and Mason lost his balance, crumpled to the floor. He tipped forward, stiff, head stopping his fall. He had no control of his limbs, they were locked up and jittery, and he couldn't right himself.

It was luck, really. The woman stepped forward and leaned over, looking down at him. Mason waited a few seconds, sensing the disruptor shot wearing off, then lunged up and to the side, swinging. His arm was still out of control, but the chain whipped around and cracked her across

the face, sent her sprawling back. She hit her head against a filing cabinet, winced, then shook her head, not quite out.

Mason scrambled to his feet, legs wobbly, and staggered back through the open door. He still didn't have much control, and he couldn't stop his momentum. He hit the low railing, tried to grab it, missed, and went over.

Mason fell from the catwalk, legs and arms flailing. Moonlight exploded all around him and he hit the metal roof panel of the hut with a crash. He slid down, off the edge, and landed on his side on the moss-covered ground of the clearing.

Mason rolled slowly and painfully onto his back and lay there a long time without moving, staring up at the bright, moonlit sky. He hurt all over, but especially his ribs, his lower back, and the side of his head. And he still felt a shaking sensation vibrating through him, the aftereffect of the two disruptor shots. He glanced down at his right hand, saw he still gripped the doubled chain, his knuckles scraped and white with strain. Mason eased his grip, then finally let the chain go. He closed his eyes.

He did not sleep.

He remembered.

Not all at once. At first the memories came to him one at a time, maybe ten, fifteen minutes apart, still discreet, out of context. Mason lay without moving, eyes sometimes open, sometimes closed, waiting for them...

Out in the rough surf up to his chest, reaching out for his father who had stepped off the sand bank and into a deep trench, his father a poor swimmer and weighed down by a burlap sack filled with large and heavy clams, Mason catching hold of his father and pulling him back to the bank and safety...

A riot on the Golden Gate Bridge in the middle of a rainstorm, a cop being thrown over the side of the bridge and falling to the gray choppy water below...

Sitting in the morning sun with Alexandra, drinking coffee, cats at their feet...

The smell of lemon balm and the feel of a warm breeze...

Walking into a cantina and being shot at, the first shot missing him, the second shot hitting his shoulder...

(Mason opened his eyes, twisted his head and pulled up his left sleeve, saw the scar, three inches long.)

Squatting beside a stucco wall, playing with his hands in a bucket of green paint...

The feel of cool sand on his bare feet...

(The memories coming faster now...)

Walking along a dry creek bed, completely stoned and half convinced he was coming loose from the world...

The deep, biting smell of creosote...

Hiking up Mt. Lassen with his parents and his sisters...

In a tent, alone, with the rain coming down hard, certain he would stay warm and dry...

Watching Seven Beauties for the first time in the Parkside Theater in San Francisco, a theater long since torn down...

Eating giant prawns in a tiny restaurant in Hawaii with a stunning view of the sunset across the water...

And then his first "jump," a shock, done out of fear, a mugger's gun in his ribs, teleporting from the back of the streetcar to his apartment bedroom, confused about what he had just done, confused about what he was...

(But Mason knew now what he was. He knew.)

And more memories, on and on and on...

A kind of threshold was reached, and his past, his life slammed into him whole. It was midday now, and the sun and clouds above him began spinning. Mason turned over, tried to push himself to his feet, but lost his balance and fell back to the ground. He closed his eyes, but it didn't help. He thought he was going to vomit. He curled up on his side and lay without moving, feeling his life taking hold of him once again, digging in.

The dizziness and nausea leaked out of him, leaving behind a stinging sweat and a jittery sensation. He opened his eyes and looked around at the jungle that he now knew was not real. He *was* someplace real, but the neural distorter patched into his skull was giving the place the appearance of jungle and clearing and hut. So he wouldn't know where he was, so he wouldn't be able to teleport out of it.

Except it hadn't completely worked.

With no memory, no conscious knowledge that he was a jumper,

Mason had apparently made a blind jump, escaping from wherever they were holding him. But blind jumped to where?

Mason sat up. Where *was* he now?

He reached behind his head and felt along the base of his skull for the neural distorter. He dug gently through the hair with his fingers until he felt the narrow strip of warm metal attached to his scalp. Mason got his fingernails under it and pulled.

It came away, snow fell across his vision, and he got dizzy again, nausea returning. Mason bent over, eyes closed, and waited it out.

When the nausea eased, he opened his eyes, sat up, and looked to see where he was. No jungle. He was squatting in the dried mud and weeds beside a cinder-block hovel on the edge of a ravine. Midday, the sun bearing down, a terrible stench rising up the steep slope. Mason knew exactly where he was.

Guatemala. Zona 3 of Guatemala City, Colonia Santa Isabel. A slum of a slum. A hellhole of a place that he had used to go to ground, where nobody would ever look for him because no one would ever live here by choice.

Mason got to his feet, still a little dizzy, the distorter in his right hand between thumb and forefinger; the chain lay in the dirt beside him. A few feet away was a tin pail with a couple inches of water on the bottom — probably left in sympathy for the crazy man by someone from one of the nearby shanties. The stream water; the gourd.

He staggered into the one room building, which was even hotter inside than out despite the windows cut into the cinder-block. Lots of shadows. The place was a pit, strewn with garbage, a mattress of rotting foam. No radio. The radio had been part of his struggle against the distorter, his subconscious warning him that people were tracking him down. Mason picked through the trash, found a strip of stained fabric and a section of metal pipe, then went back outside.

He wrapped the distorter inside the fabric, tying knots around it, then tied the cloth to the pipe. He stepped to the edge of the ravine and gazed down the steep slope, almost overcome by the stench. Far below, almost invisible, was the Rio La Barranca. Mason leaned back, then threw the pipe as hard as he could to the left and away; it arced up and out and then down, spinning, landing far below him and setting off the distant barking

of dogs. Let the bastards search for him down among the sewage and garbage and corpses.

Mason sat down in the weeds, his back against the cinder-block, thinking. He'd been a part of this war for far too long, and he didn't even really know what the sides were, or what they wanted. They had wanted to use him because he was a jumper, but other than that, what did he really know?

Names. *Anarchists. Reformers. Statists.* Three "sides" that he knew of, and there were probably more. But what did those names really mean, if anything? All he knew for certain was that all of them had lied to him at one time or another. And that one side or the other had killed Alexandra, and it might have been the *Reformers*, the side he'd been working for, the side he'd once foolishly believed was trying to do some good.

He lay back in the weeds, gazing up at the hazy yellow and blue sky. He had tried to quit the whole business, and that's when Alexandra had been killed. Saranday, the woman in shock armor with the disruptor, had told him the *Statists* had been responsible, giving him revenge as a reason to stay in. But when he'd told her he was getting out anyway, she'd said they wouldn't let him. And then, when they'd tracked him down in that subterranean chamber, in the room with the antiquated office furniture, she'd blasted him half a dozen times with the disruptor and, apparently, patched in the neural distorter. He didn't know what had happened after that — he still had no memory from that point until he'd awakened in the jungle. Had his memory loss been deliberately induced, or had it been just a side-effect of the disruptor blasts? He'd probably never know that, either, and it didn't really matter.

And why had he gone to that place, the underground chamber with the machines, long forgotten and buried, why had he gone to that room? Because of the words of Silas, a dying, crazy old man, who had told him there was information in that room, information that would bring them all down. What? Mason had asked, but Silas had just told him he would know it when he saw it, would know what to do with it. But Mason had searched all through that room, spent hours looking through files and documents, and if he'd run across what the old man had been talking about, he hadn't recognized it. More likely the dying old man had just been out of his mind.

Mason got to his feet, went around to the front of the cinder-block building and back inside. He picked up a dented metal plate and took it into the rear corner of the room. He knelt on the floor and began digging with the plate through the packed earth. It took him about fifteen minutes to uncover the metal box and pull it out of the hole. He unlatched and raised the lid, removed a package wrapped tightly in several layers of sealed plastic and oilskin.

The package contained a passport, cash, a couple of supposedly clear, untraceable credit chips, and a 10 mm Smith & Wesson along with two full clips. Mason put everything except the gun and clips in his pockets, then set the gun and clips on a shelf of cinder block just below the window looking out into the ravine.

He put one clip into the gun and jammed it home, then released it and did the same with the other clip. He left the second clip in, stuck the first in his front pocket, then stuffed the gun into the waist of his pants, trying to hide it with his loose shirt. Not very effective, and uncomfortable, but he didn't have much choice. He wasn't going to try to get out of this country without it.

Saranday was right, of course. He would not be able to jump his way out of here, not for at least two days; maybe longer. The two boomerang jumps — to the cantina and the underground chamber — had drained him completely. He could wait those two days, then jump to some other place he knew. But Saranday was probably telling the truth about closing in on him here, and that would be way too risky. Besides, he had learned over the years never to make a jump unless he absolutely had to — not when it left him without the option of doing it again for two or three days. No, he'd get out on his own — by foot, bus, car, train, whatever it took.

And after that, what? He had no idea. Go after them, somehow. Keep looking for something that would bring them down, all of them. Perhaps even return to the underground chamber, search it again. Something. He had his life back, that's what really mattered. He had his life back, and he was going to keep it. No one would ever use him that way again.

Mason checked the interior of the hovel, making sure he wasn't leaving anything behind that could identify him; he wanted to be able to use this place again if he had to. He touched the gun, double-checked his pockets for the passport and money, then stepped out into the sun.

They converged on him from all directions, five, six figures in shock armor. The closest one, a man who stopped just a few feet away, held a disruptor aimed directly at him.

"Mason," the man said. But nothing else.

Mason didn't say a thing, feeling numb and paralyzed. He looked from side to side at the men and women surrounding him. He didn't recognize any of them, but he knew who they were, and he knew what they wanted.

"Down on the ground," the man with the disruptor said. "Flat, arms and legs spread."

Mason couldn't believe it. After all he'd been through...

He reached for the gun, and the man with the disruptor fired.

The heat was killing him. From the trees came the loud chatter of monkeys and the droning buzz of insects; a bird cawed, long and piercing. Mason didn't know where he was; he hardly knew *who* he was.

He stumbled out of the jungle and into a clearing. A cloud of blue and white butterflies rose from the moss at his feet, fluttering about his face and momentarily blinding him. When the butterflies cleared away, he saw a hut on the other side of the clearing.

For some strange and unfathomable reason, the sight of the hut filled him with overwhelming despair. He took a step toward it, then stopped, unable to go on. Hopeless, and utterly lost, Mason dropped to his knees and wept.



Steve Perry's recent books include a collaboration with Gary Braunbeck, Asimov's I-Bots: Time Was, and a comic book miniseries, Shadows of the Empire: Evolution. Steve also hints at a couple of books about which Humanity Was Not Meant To Know.

This new story deserves a Hollywood banner ad like "He's Back...And He's Looking to Mate!"

A Few Minutes in Granddaddy's Old House on Black Bottom Bayou

By Steve Perry

THE THUNDERSTORM washed its way closer. The rain pounded on the roof, lightning flashed, thunder grumbled in the night and the dark, damp wind moaned softly at the edges of the big old two-story house.

"A f**king frog-drowner out there," Granddaddy Bill said.

Granddaddy Bill was sick again — though Grandma Annabelle said it was only a hangover — so Harold and Johnny decided to tell him a story to make him feel better.

Harold, nine, usually took the lead, while Johnny, six, mostly did chorus.

Even though it was past their bedtime, Grandma Annabelle let them stay up to visit with Granddaddy Bill because he didn't feel good. Plus they were going back to their house on Monday, since school started in a few days.

It had been a pretty boring summer so far.

The boys perched on the foot of the old man's musty old bed and waited for Granddaddy Bill to sip more of his toddy. Southern Comfort and lemon juice and honey, Granddaddy Bill said, good for colds, flu, consumption and the rheumatiz. Granddaddy Bill's bedroom always smelled like pipe tobacco, Southern Comfort and Old Spice. And mold. Grandma Annabelle's bedroom smelled like perfume.

"So, what story are you going to tell me?" he said. He put the toddy down.

"How about the *Creature from Black Bottom Bayou*?" Harold said.

"The Creature is o-kkkay ..." Johnny drawled. "Though it's not as good as *Jurassic Park*. Those dinosaurs were cool!"

Granddaddy Bill sneezed, used a tissue to blow his nose. Threw the soggy clump of tissue on the floor next to the bed where another dozen wads of it already lay. "Where'd you hear this Creature story?"

Johnny bounced up and down on the bed, said, "You told it to us, Granddaddy!"

The old man smiled. "So I did. But you know us old people, we forget things. Okay. How does it go?"

Harold took a deep breath and started. "Once upon a time, in Lafayette, Louisiana, in this very house, many, many, *many* years ago, there were two brothers who came to visit their Grandma."

"Yeah, yeah, that was you and Great-Uncle-Richie, right, Granddaddy? And you were visiting Great-Great Grandma Phyllis."

"Shut up, Johnny," Harold said. "And sit still."

"I'm gonna tell Grandma Annabelle you said 'Shut up!'"

"Go ahead. You'll miss the story."

Johnny shut up.

"Anyway, they slept in the Piano Room, which had French doors that opened out on the back yard, just like they do now. The yard ran straight to Black Bottom Bayou, less than a hundred feet away, just like it does now. It was a summer night, just like it is now and it was raining, and raining and..."

The rain came down in waves, hard, then soft, then hard again. The wind blew and moaned softly at the edges of the house. When the lightning flashed, Billy and Richie could see Black Bottom Bayou gurgling past, oily,

sluggish and as dark as its name. The frogs were going crazy. Every once in a while, Molly — that was Grandma Phyllis's three-legged pomeranian — Molly would wake up and yip, but the little dog's yappy bark didn't make the boys feel any better. When it came down to it, Molly wouldn't be much help. She was afraid of Cisco and Pancho and they were just parakeets.

"F**king *stinking* parakeets who sh*t on everything," Granddaddy Carl had said more than a few times.

Billy clutched at his Red Ryder BB gun, the plastic stock slippery with sweat. He wasn't supposed to load or cock it in the house but you better believe it was loaded and cocked now. A whole pack of BBs in it. Richie was too little to have a BB gun, which was too bad. Two guns would be better than one when the Monster came. And if ever it was gonna come, this was the night for it.

"I'm scared," Richie said.

"Don't worry, I've got Old Betsy here." He patted the gun. BB's rattled inside it. He'd named her after Davy Crockett's rifle. "If it tries to get in, I'll shoot its eyes out."

"Wh-what if you miss?"

"I won't miss. You remember that water moccasin? I hit it in the head, didn't I? And that turtle? And those frogs? And that mockingbird? And you better not even *think* about telling Grandma Phyllis about the bird."

"I won't tell, but — a *monster* is different, Billy."

Billy nodded silently. Yeah, that was sure right. Ever since Grandma Phyllis had dropped them off last week for the double-feature at the Paramount Theater while she'd gone shopping, they'd been expecting to see it. *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers* hadn't been so bad, but *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, well, that was something else. The flying saucers were in Washington, that was a million miles away, but the Creature lived in a bayou. At night here in the Piano Room, where they slept on the pink-and-blue couch and matching love seat, looking straight at the bayou, they knew it was out there. A couple of nights, they were pretty sure they'd heard it splashing around, making weird noises. They'd looked for footprints during the daytime, but the thing was pretty smart, it must have covered them up. But they *had* found dead catfish that had been partially eaten and they knew: It had been there. Before he went back to his job on the oil rigs, Granddaddy Carl had told them it was the

snapping turtles who ate the catfish but Billy didn't believe that was true. It was the Creature.

And when it got tired of eating fish...

A gust of wind rattled the French doors.

"Maybe the fence will stop it," Richie said.

"Shoot, the Creature could rip it apart like it was old rotten kite string. Or jump right over it." The little chain link fence was just high enough to keep three-legged Molly in the yard. Even Richie could climb over it in about two seconds.

"I'm scared, Billy."

"It's okay. I'll protect us."

But he was nervous.

The lamp on the table flickered.

"What's that?!"

"It's okay. Just the lightning making the power ... f**kshuate." That's what Granddaddy Carl had said it did when it stormed.

The light went out.

Richie squealed.

"It's okay, it's okay! Get out your flashlight!"

Billy dug his own light out of the couch cushion where he'd stuffed it for just such an emergency —

Suddenly he went blind.

"Jesus, Richie, get that out of my face! Point it at the door, not at me!"

The two ghostly rings of light danced across the French doors. Lightning flared, thunder rumbled right after it. Close.

"What's that?!" Richie said.

"What?"

"Outside, I saw something out there!"

Billy was trying to point his flashlight and hold the BB gun at the same time. The light would have to go, he couldn't shoot too good with one hand. "Shine your light on it," he whispered. He raised the BB gun and propped it on the arm of the couch, aimed at the doors. "I got it covered."

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

All of a sudden, Billy needed to go pee, real bad.

Lightning struck the oak tree down by the fence. Thunder boomed so

loud Billy thought it was gonna break the glass, but he couldn't see, because the lightning blinded him again.

This time, Billy's eyes took a few seconds for the purple spots to fade. When he could see again, the first thing he noticed was that the French doors were wide open.

He said the F-word.

"What? What?" Richie said. He had burrowed down in the couch cushions, but he came up to see what was going on.

"The thunder knocked the doors open! Quick, go close them."

"Not me! You go close them!"

"I have to stand guard. Go on. I'll cover you."

"I'm not going."

"Richie..."

"No! You go!"

Billy glared at his little brother. "Go or I'll shoot you." He waved the BB gun.

"I'm gonna tell Grandma Phyllis!"

"I don't *care* if you tell her. Just go and shut the f*cking doors. Now!"

But before anybody could move, lightning struck again.

Outlined against the white flash in the doorway stood the Creature.

Both Billy and Richie screamed.

"Why didn't Great-Great-Grandma Phyllis wake up when the lightning struck?" Johnny asked. "Or when Billy and Richie screamed?"

"Because she was as deaf as toast," Harold said.

"Deaf as a post," Granddaddy Bill put in. "Although toast probably doesn't hear too good, either, come to think of it. Go on."

"I bet it wasn't as scary as the dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park*," Johnny said.

"Shut up, Johnny. Well, there it was. Just like from the movie. Big, green, scaly, dripping water all over Grandma Phyllis's Persian rug..."

Billy, even though terrified, whipped his Daisy air rifle up and fired. In his panic, he forgot to aim for the eyes, but the thing was so close he couldn't miss.

He didn't miss.

"Hey! Ow!" the Creature said.

The lights came back on.

The Creature, seven-feet-tall if it was an inch, rubbed at his chest with a webbed and clawed hand. Slimy water dripped out of its gills. It looked at Billy, who sat on the couch open-mouthed. "What'd you go and do that for? That stings."

The Creature's voice was burbly. He coughed, hawked, and spat something onto the rug. It was a crawfish. The mudbug bounced onto its back. Righted itself, then scuttled backward under the couch. "Shoulda chewed you better," the monster said.

"Grandma Phyllis is gonna be mad about the wet rug," Richie said. "And she don't let us bring crawfish into the house. Or snakes."

"Why don't you put that thing away," the Creature said. He waved at Billy.

Billy had forgotten to recock his gun anyway, he was so surprised.

The Creature said, "Boy, it's a terrible night out there. Got the gar all stirred up."

Billy and Richie looked at each other.

"You can talk. How come you didn't talk in the movie?" Richie asked.

"Oh, you saw that? I thought I did okay, but I'm not writing my acceptance speech, if you know what I mean. Being mute, that was for dramatic effect," the Creature said. "Director had his own 'vision.' Pah. Reason I don't do much work out there, if I can help it. They all got 'vision.' Okay if I sit down?"

"On Grandma's couch? Are you crazy? You're all wet!" Billy was horrified.

"Yeah, well, I live in a f**king bayou, now, don't I? What'd you expect? I'll sit on the rug. It's already wet."

"Grandma's gonna be mad."

"Hey, I'm tired here. F**k Grandma."

"Can't," Richie said.

"Can't sit down?"

"No, can't f**k Grandma. That's what Granddaddy Carl says. That's why he goes to the oil rigs so much," Richie said.

The Creature laughed. It was a wheezy, wet sound, but it was a laugh. "Ah, your Granddaddy Carl, he's a character. So he's gone again, huh?"

"To the oil rigs," Richie repeated.

"Just between us, kid, he stops off at a place in New Iberia on his way to the rigs. A fancy cathouse — not that I've been there myself. Guy like me doesn't have to pay for it."

"Pay for what?" Billy asked. "A cat?"

"Why would he do that? Granddaddy doesn't even like cats," Johnny added.

The Creature made that wheezy, wet sound again.

"What's so funny?"

"Give it a few years, kid, you'll understand when you're older."

The boys looked at each other. Mom and Dad said that a lot.

The Creature sat. He crossed his legs. A puddle formed around his body on the rug. "I don't suppose either of you play chess?"

"No. But we play poker. Granddaddy Carl taught us."

"No sh*t? Hey, great. Get the cards. Play for matches?"

"You have matches?"

"Do I look like I have a lot of use for matches, kid? We'll use yours. I'll give 'em back after I win."

"Billy. My name is Billy. This is Richie."

"Billy. Richie. I'm Howie. I usually play chess with your Granddaddy, but poker is okay."

"You play chess with Granddaddy Carl? He knows about you?"

"Sure. We've been playing for years. Usually on rainy summer nights. When lightning strikes the water out there, it gets real uncomfortable, you know? Dead fish floating around, the gar get to snapping at everything, the turtles get spastic. Tingles like hell, too. You know how nasty garfish can be when they get squirrely? Like big ole mosquitoes. Not to even mention the 'gators. I try to avoid the place until the lightning stops. So, you want to play poker or what?"

"I'll get the cards," Richie said.

"That's three matches to you," Billy said.

"Keep your pajamas on, I'm thinking here," Howie said. He looked at his cards. Howie had at least one ace, Billy knew, because the fish man had accidentally put a claw mark on the back of it a couple of hands back and Billy saw it. Probably had a pair of aces, since it was jacks or better to open and he'd opened.

"I think you're bluffing," Howie said. "I see your three and raise you two."

He tossed five matches into the pot.

"I fold," Richie said. He threw his cards down on the rug. "All I had was a f**king pair of threes."

"Don't say f**k," Billy said.

"Howie says it. Granddaddy Carl says it. Daddy says it, you say it — "

"They're grownups and I'm older than you. You can't say f**k until you're at least nine."

"You said it last year when you were eight," Richie allowed.

"Fine. When you're eight, you can, but since you're only six, you can't, so shut up." To Howie, he said, "Okay, I'll see your two and raise you two more."

Howie glanced down at his cards, then at Billy, then back at his cards again. Billy kept his poker face on, just like Granddaddy Carl had taught him.

"All right. Take it." Howie tossed his cards face down. "I had a pair of aces. What did you have?"

"You gotta pay to see 'em," Billy said.

"Jeezus, kid, who do you think you are? Bret Maverick? We're playing for matches here!"

"Well, okay. I had two pair, sixes and nines." He turned his cards over.

"Your Granddaddy teach you how to deal from the bottom when he showed you how to play this game? Gimme the cards. My deal. Five card draw, nothing is wild, jacks or better."

Howie picked up the deck. Considering how big his hands were and his claws and all, he shuffled pretty good. He started to deal, but Billy stopped him. "Don't I get to cut?"

Howie shook his head. He looked up at the ceiling. "Spare me. Amarillo Slim here thinks I'm cheating for matches." The crawfish he'd coughed up earlier suddenly scuttled out from under the couch. Billy didn't know where it thought it was going. Howie reached over, real fast, and grabbed the crawfish. It wriggled in his claws for a second before he popped it into his mouth and ate it. It crunched in his teeth as he chewed.

"Gotcha this time, Houdini." Howie said.

"Eyuuw," Richie said.

"Tastes just like chicken, kid. Here, cut."

Lying in bed, propped up on four pillows, Granddaddy Bill smiled. "Pass me the toddy, would you, Harold?"

The old man took a big drink. "Ah. Okay. So then what happened?"

Richie lost all his matches trying to draw to an inside straight pretty early. After Billy cleaned Howie out on a hand of showdown, Howie said, "Jeezus. Beaten by a nine-year-old kid." He glanced at the ceiling, then outside through the French doors. "Still coming down pretty good out there. You know where your Granddaddy keeps the chess board?"

"Sure. Under the kitchen cabinet, next to the bug spray and the Old Crow and Camels."

"Why don't you run get it and I'll teach you how to play. Maybe I can beat you at that. So far this evening, my ego's getting the sh*t kicked out of it."

"Go get it, Richie," Billy said.

"Why do I have to go get it? It's dark in the kitchen. I'm afraid."

"You're stupid, you know that? What are you afraid of? We got a *monster* sitting right here on the rug with us. What could be worse in the kitchen?"

"Thanks, kid. You ain't no prize yourself, you know. Some jug must be real unhappy you swiped its handles for your ears."

"Go on, Richie."

Richie went and got the chess board.

"Okay, here's the deal. These are the pawns, they only move like this..."

Howie won all the chess games, but that was okay. They played for a long time. Richie fell asleep on the floor and Howie put him on the couch and covered him with the sheet. A little while later, the rain stopped, and just before dawn, they heard somebody flush the toilet down the hall.

"Unless that gimpy little dog is a lot smarter than it looks, that's your granny. I better hit the water, kid. I don't want the old lady to find me here. Carl would never hear the end of it. Probably ought to keep this visit to yourself, too."

He stood, pretty dry now, though the rug was still wet.

"Thank you for teaching us how to play chess, Howie."

"No sweat, kid. Thanks for the poker game. Billy, right? See you later."

The sun wasn't up but it was getting light. Billy watched as Howie padded across the squishy back yard, opened the gate and closed it behind himself, then waded into the bayou. After a second, he disappeared into the murky water.

Grandma was mad about the rug and she took away Billy's BB gun for three days but that didn't really matter — he didn't much need the gun after that.

What was going to bother them with Howie around?

"That's a pretty good story," Granddaddy Bill said. "You think it's true?"

Both Harold and Johnny laughed.

"Come on, Granddaddy! A seven-foot-tall monster coming out of the bayou? No way," Harold said.

"And not *even* as scary as a dinosaur," Johnny added.

"Oh, really?" said a burbly voice from behind them.

Harold and Johnny turned as one, eyes going wide.

"I got your *Jurassic Park* right here, kid," the seven-foot-tall monster said.

"F* *k!" Harold and Johnny said together.

Granddaddy Bill laughed so hard that some of the toddy came out of his nose, but after that everything was just fine. Howie and Granddaddy Bill played chess.

Granddaddy Bill beat him two out of three.

"I never should have taught you this game," the Creature said.

And, when you got right down to it, the summer turned out not to be so boring after all.



Nina Hoffman's stories often have a musical component to them, as we saw most recently in "Gone to Heaven Shouting" in January. This poignant new one doesn't feature any outright music, but if you listen up, you'll hear a symphony within a whisper.

Sweet Nothings

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

EVER SINCE DAD DIED, THE sweet nothings stayed in Douglas's room. He didn't know how to make them go away.

When Mom came in after lights out, the sweet nothings hid under Douglas's bed. He wished they would go under Arthur's for a change, but they didn't like the way Arthur smelled. Arthur thought that soap was some kind of Martian plot to make his skin hurt, so he usually didn't use it.

Mom had always made Douglas use the soap. She used to make Arthur use soap too, but since Dad died Mom just wasn't on top of things the way she used to be.

Mom would come in and say good night to Arthur and Douglas, and the whole time the sweet nothings would be whispering somewhere just below Douglas's ear. The worst thing about it was that he could almost understand them. He was sure they were talking about things no ten-year-old should hear.

They had first appeared one night when Dad was whispering to Mom on the sofa while Arthur and Douglas were sitting on the floor, doing a puzzle and watching *The Simpsons*. Arthur didn't seem to notice anything, but Douglas saw Dad's head close to Mom's, and saw Mom smile a secret smile that said she was thinking about something Douglas couldn't understand. Dad whispered some more and Mom let out a little giggle that made her sound like someone in seventh grade.

Small bouncy pink things showed up in the corners of the room as Dad and Mom whispered and giggled. It made Douglas feel creepy. They looked like soft rubber bunnies, but they had no eyes or ears. They had chubby hands, bigger than their heads, bigger than their feet. And the hands were reaching toward Mom and Dad, fingers curved to clutch. The wide little mouths always stretched into toothless grins. Sometimes tongues came out of their mouths and licked — licked their own faces, or each others'. Their tongues were way too long.

Douglas nudged Arthur, and pointed toward the pink things. Arthur looked. Then he looked back at Douglas, his eyes narrowing. "This some kind of trick?" he whispered.

"What?" Douglas whispered.

"What'd you do? You steal a piece of the puzzle when I looked away?"

"What?"

"What are you up to?" Arthur's whisper was mad now.

"The pink things," Douglas whispered, "don't you see the pink things?"

"What are you talking about?" Arthur peeked over his shoulder at Mom and Dad. Douglas looked too. Mom and Dad were staring at each other. Masses of pink things sat along the arms and back of the couch, reaching out, opening and closing their too-big hands.

Arthur punched Douglas in the shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

"The pink things," Douglas said, his whisper fading. He rubbed his arm where Arthur had punched him.

"There are no pink things. Shut up."

The pink things hopped around, flexing their fingers, gripping nothing, as long as Dad whispered. Later, when Dad and Mom sent Douglas and Arthur up to brush their teeth, the little pink things disappeared.

"What was Dad whispering to you last night?" Douglas asked at breakfast the next day. Dad had left for work already.

"Sweet nothings," Mom said, and smiled, staring at the wall.

Douglas hoped Dad would never do that again, but it happened. Douglas made a study of the little pink things. They never actually *did* anything. They smelled like burnt sugar and butter and hot milk. Their grins reminded him of little devils, even though they didn't have horns or a tail.

Douglas actually started to look forward to the nights when Mom and Dad were fighting. No jiggling little pink things with clutching fingers those nights. But whenever Mom and Dad made up.... Douglas took to staring straight at the TV when that happened, but he could still see bouncing pink from the corners of his eyes.

Arthur told Douglas he was being weird. "What's the matter with you? You sick or something? How come you're not eating your deserts?"

Douglas didn't know what Arthur was complaining about. Douglas usually sneaked his dessert to Arthur later. Arthur was meaner and madder than he used to be, though, no matter what Douglas did.

The fights got louder.

Douglas remembered the biggest fight. He and Arthur had hidden in their room with the lights out while the shouting was going on.

Douglas was thinking very hard about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Michelangelo was Douglas's favorite, and Douglas was trying to talk himself out of this. Everybody knew Michelangelo was the stupid one. He liked to party, but he was stupid. So why did Douglas love him the best? Leonardo was obviously smarter and stronger and braver; he was the leader. Douglas decided from now on he would like Leonardo the best. You couldn't like Raph. Raph got mad a lot. That wasn't good. Getting mad just hurt people. Donatello was the smartest, and he loved playing with his machines, but Douglas didn't like machines. Once Arthur had set up the toaster to give Douglas a shock. Arthur was good at machines. He could make the TV go to channels that weren't even on cable. No, Douglas didn't really like Donatello.

But Leo. He could like Leo.

Deep inside he knew he would always like Michelangelo the best.

The door slammed downstairs, louder than Douglas had ever heard it. Douglas closed his eyes and thought about Michelangelo's face, grinning beneath his orange headband. Michelangelo had the best grin.

Mom was crying. Arthur and Douglas sat on their beds in the dark and waited. Douglas didn't remember falling asleep, but he woke up and it was light outside and his neck hurt.

He never saw or heard Dad again.

Dad went to the Next Place — that was what Mom said, anyway, as though he had moved to another town and sooner or later they would all catch up to him. Aunt Ruby, who took care of Arthur and Douglas while Mom went to say good-bye, said, "I'm sorry, but I just don't hold with keeping you boys in the dark. You have to know, and if Hazel doesn't tell you now and you find out later what she's hiding from you, it's going to hurt you. Children, your father is dead."

Arthur turned pale. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the floor. Douglas thought, just for a second, no more sweet nothings, no more yelling. Good. Then he hit himself in the head so hard it hurt, and he started crying. He couldn't get himself to stop. Aunt Ruby kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and tried to get him to sip from a cup of water. Nothing helped. His head fogged up after a crying while and Aunt Ruby put him to bed. Arthur never said a word.

The sweet nothings didn't show up again until a couple weeks after the funeral. Douglas and Arthur were watching TV on the floor, like they always did, and Mom was sitting on the couch hugging a pillow. She was sad a lot. Douglas never knew what to do about her being sad.

Sometimes Douglas was sad himself, remembering the way Dad used to rub his hair, or make special pancakes the shape of his initial on Sunday mornings, or the way on Douglas's tenth birthday he was allowed to stay up really late and he just sat with Dad on the front porch looking at stars and talking, and nobody had been in a hurry to go anywhere or do the next thing, it had been as if they had all the time in the world.

That was the day Dad had finally allowed him to have a pocket knife, too. Douglas kept the knife in his pocket all the time, closing his hand around it often during the day. If he found a piece of string he would open up the knife and cut through it. The blade was very sharp. Dad had

promised to show Douglas how to sharpen the blade on a whetstone, but now he never would.

The night the sweet nothings came back, Douglas and Arthur were watching some nature program. Mom always seemed happier when they were watching some nature program. This one was about cats and it talked about how the father cat sometimes came in the barn and killed all the kittens that weren't his. Douglas thought it was creepy. He reached into his pocket for his knife and all he found was a little hole in the bottom of his pocket. His stomach twisted and hurt him. He couldn't believe it. It was like he lost Dad all over.

Before he started crying — he was afraid he wouldn't know how to stop again, so he had never let himself cry since that one night with Aunt Ruby — he looked up, looked all around, hoping that if the knife had fallen out, it had fallen out right here at home so he could find it again.

That was when he saw the sweet nothings. They were sitting in front of the couch, their blind faces aimed toward Mom. She didn't seem to notice them. She just sat there hugging the big orange pillow, with tears running down her face.

The weird thing was the sweet nothings weren't reaching out and opening and closing their fingers the way they used to. They just sat there like little rubber bunnies. They were almost...cute.

Douglas forgot about his knife until the next morning, when he searched the whole house for it and couldn't find it. He asked Mom if she had seen it, and she checked inside the washer and dryer for him, but the knife wasn't there. "I'll get you another one, sweetie," she said.

"But it — " Douglas said. He could tell that the hurt place inside wouldn't disappear until he found his own knife. "It isn't..." Then he looked at Mom and saw that her face had its right-before-tears look. "Okay."

Everywhere he went — to the school, to the store — he still kept an eye out for his knife.

When the sweet nothings came back the next night, Douglas watched them out of the corner of his eye. The third time they came back, he actually edged over and touched one. It felt smooth and warm and sort of wet, and he liked touching it, but he thought he shouldn't like touching it. He let go of it right away.

That was the night they followed him up to his bedroom after Mom made him and Arthur turn off the TV and go to bed.

The sweet nothings moved right into Douglas's and Arthur's room that night and they only left when everybody was downstairs watching TV. Douglas was always scared when he had to pee in the middle of the night. He was afraid he'd step on one, or that they would all crawl into his bed while he was gone and be waiting there to grab him with their chubby clutching hands when he slid back between the covers. Usually he just took the covers with him to the bathroom so that the bed was bare when he got back and he could see its clean white surface by the nightlight and make sure no little pink lumps huddled there.

After a little while Arthur stopped punching Douglas in the shoulder; or maybe Douglas just stopped noticing it.

"You're getting too weird," Arthur told him. "Stop it."

But how could he stop it? The sweet nothings were *there*. What was he supposed to do, step on them? Let them grab him?

Douglas had seen Arthur step on one and not even shiver. The sweet nothing got up afterward as though nothing had happened.

Douglas wished he could get rid of them somehow.

Sometimes Douglas thought about putting the sweet nothings in a sack and throwing them in the Dumpster at school.

No, that probably wouldn't work. Dad had gone to the Next Place, and the sweet nothings had found their way back from there. They could probably come home from anything.

He thought about drowning them, but he wasn't even sure they were alive. How could you kill something that wasn't alive?

If he could only find his knife, maybe he could — but Dad had told him the knife was only for cutting string or scotch tape, or for whittling. "Never hurt anyone with this," Dad had said.

The best thing would be if he could get a steamroller to run over them, but maybe they'd pop back into shape like Judge Doom in *Roger Rabbit*.

One night he decided to do something even though he didn't think it would work. He took the big fuzzy orange pillow cover off the pillow that Mom was always hugging on the couch and he caught the sweet nothings — they didn't try very hard to get away, and when he picked them up, they

snuggled in his hand and some of them licked him. It made him feel good in an icky way.

He put them all in the pillow case and zipped it shut right before the Sunday evening nature show came on, and then he brought the pillow downstairs. The sweet nothings made a pretty lumpy pillow. If Mom noticed something different, Douglas wasn't sure what would happen. He was tired of things being the same, though.

He noticed right away that the sweet nothings didn't ooze out of the pillow cover and reappear on the floor the way he had been afraid they would. Mom hugged the pillow. The TV talked about the lives of ants. Arthur colored in pictures of Muppets. Douglas took a blue crayon and a piece of paper and started coloring a sky in a big picture. He did short lines very close to each other and worked across the top, then moved down and worked the next stripe, leaving no speck of white page behind.

When he peeked at Mom, she was crying the way she usually did, but she had her cheek pressed against the pillow and there was a little smile on her face. She didn't even seem to notice how funny the pillow was. When she went to bed, she took the pillow with her.

Douglas looked at his picture the next morning in the wake of the first whisper-free night he'd had in a long time. A solid blue sky the size and shape of his piece of paper. He had been concentrating so hard on making the white blue that he had forgotten to leave room for anything else.

He decided that was okay. Sometimes you just had to look at the problem and not anywhere else. He got out a new piece of paper and spilled the crayons out of the coffee can onto the kitchen table, and there was his knife.

He held it in his hand a long time before he picked up a green crayon. He opened the blade of his knife and sharpened the crayon, leaving little curls of color in the middle of his paper. He sharpened the pink crayon and the brown crayon and the silver, and then he wiped his knife off on his jeans, closed the blade, and set the knife right on the table next to where he was working, so he could see it.

He closed his eyes. He opened them. The knife was still there. He smiled and started a new picture.



Jan Lars Jensen is a librarian in British Columbia. His short fiction has appeared in Aboriginal SF, Interzone, and most recently in Tesseract 6. His first novel, Shiva 3000, is due out next year. This inventive historical story marks his first appearance in our pages and we think it's a memorable debut.

The Pacific Front

By Jan Lars Jensen

SOMEONE HAD CAUGHT A dolphin, it now roasted over an open fire. They'd strung it by the beak and fluke and where it hung closest to the

coals the carcass was blackened but the distinct dolphin shape persisted through the cooking. "You like dolphin, Hiro?" someone shouted and laughter went up like sparks from the fire. "Soo-shee soo-shee soo-shee." It only took one of them to start, then they were all chanting. The whole camp joined in, *soo-shee soo-shee*, from the big tent pitched at the foothills all the way to lookouts wading along the shore.

Hiro walked past the fires each beaded with their orange chanting faces, threading his way to the structure known as Non-Flying Fortress. Cross-sections of bomber lay spaced over the foothills, the gaps between each patched with island materials, seaweed and palm leaves, long curtains of frond. Seven days, and the bomber looked as if it had grown into place.

"No, they don't much care for you."

A rasp of a match, the momentary face of Sergeant Hellerman.

"But I don't understand," said Hiro. "We are all members of the Air Force..."

"In situations like these men need scapegoats." The sergeant shrugged. "Guess you're the obvious choice."

Hiro didn't respond, walked past him through the dark through the trail slapped along the way by its green gauntlet of oversized leaves. He wasn't afraid like some of the others to leave the series of fires, wasn't worried by the island and the unsettling patterns weathered into the rock. He left for the deserted side where cymbal crash chasing cymbal crash of waves over shore shushed out all other sounds. Stepping carefully in his rubber sandals he followed a path through the island wild, stopping at the height of a cliff to stare at moon-tipped waves recurring to the black horizon.

Before the crash he hadn't known these men. They had flown a hundred miles together but the bomber had been strictly compartmentalized. Hiro was supposed to have spent the flight alone, huddled into the ball gun turret, the gun removed as a concession to weight. Mile upon mile of blue Pacific scrolled beneath him while he waited for the plane to break through clouds over Japan, his moment. Then, he was supposed to speak into the mike describing what he could see, confirming or denying that they were in position over the target.

But they didn't get that far.

Somewhere over the Pacific the bomber faltered, the engine dying like someone turning down a radio and just as smoothly descending, bouncing over wavetops and riding onto the island. The transparent ball smashed open throwing Hiro onto this unfamiliar ground.

Other crew members emerged from the wreck. This was the first time they met as a complete group. Amazed they were alive. Terrified they had failed so important a mission. "What the hell happened?" "Where are we?" Tense strangers, they stared at one another waiting to be blamed for causing the crash.

During the silence they heard a voice.

"I'm trapped, someone please, please give me a hand..."

The voice seeped out of one upturned segment of plane. It was the bomb bay, the whole section intact but jammed against the hillside. The

bombardier inside had no way out. Hiro and the others stared at the compartment wondering how to help.

"We could roll it up over a cliff," one lieutenant suggested. "Smash the damn thing open." Great idea, another said, kill him quickly, and the two lieutenants rolled away in a fist fight while the problem of releasing the bombardier remained complete as the cylinder enclosing him. Great effort and several loose pieces of metal went into an attempt to pry open the bomb bay doors. A night, a day, another night. The bombardier started singing about pork chops and baked potatoes and big sloppy buckets of draft beer. "Shut your yap!" one of the men finally yelled. They'd never be able to adjust to this predicament, one of them so boisterously starving to death.

The soldiers preferred problems they could solve, and most turned their attention to making camp, outside the range of the bombardier's voice. Hiro studied the crumpled remains of the cockpit. He fingered different tangles of wire hanging from its sundered walls, and by the time the bombardier started singing of car-sized chocolate cakes and endless apple pie, Hiro had decided which wires controlled the hydraulic bay doors. But this meant nothing without electricity, and the batteries of the bomber were nowhere to be seen.

"Citrus fruit," Hiro said. "Copper wire."

Both were locally available and with them he patched together an amateur battery, a crude but appropriate marriage of elements from the wreck and elements of the island, and after carrying it gingerly to the bomb bay Hiro took a moment to appreciate the yin-yang balance of his creation.

"Look up," someone said.

He did, and saw a gun, and behind that one of the men. *Carson* read the tag stitched over his heart, and Hiro had looked at the man's raggedly wounded ear before and thought of the eastern front; the gun he was pointing looked like something pried from the fingers of a German corpse, too. Hiro and the others stared in confusion.

"The item in that compartment isn't for your eyes."

"Item?" Carson was obviously confused. "We are trying to save the man inside —"

"Enough!" He cocked the hammer. "The item in that compartment

is top secret. We were supposed to drop it on Kyoto, go home, game over. Some of you know more about our payload than others. But I don't want to hear anyone talking about it. And nobody — *nobody* — opens those goddamn doors until we get word from above."

Someone said, "Not even to save the bombardier?"

Carson shook his head. "Fuck the bombardier."

Silence, and the day seemed to darken, the only light a candle of fanatical devotion burning behind Carson's eyes, then other fires, bonfires, and Hiro sank into the background after watching the man yank out the critical wires and crush the amateur battery underfoot and eat its lemon heart.

"The doors stay shut," Carson said. "For good."

But Hiro snuck back to the compartment later, rapping on the wall and whispering to the bombardier inside that he was very sorry his idea for opening the doors had failed, he was sorry to raise hopes, so sorry... A tribute to meatloaf trailed off. "I'm sure you did your best," said the bombardier, weakly.

After that the men acted like he no longer existed. They stood at the water's edge and speculated on how the war progressed without them. They stared at the sky and wondered why a rescue mission had not yet arrived. But they no longer spoke of the bombardier, and Hiro wondered if he himself had also slipped from the world as they knew it, because he was no longer invited into conversations, he felt vaguely unwelcome in camp, he was not missed when he started making pilgrimages to the island's loneliest reaches. The night the dolphin blackened and burned Hiro chose the most treacherous path the island could offer, descending a cliffside to the beach below.

Was he right about failing the bombardier? Would Carson be so protective of the plane's secret payload if Hiro was not of Japanese descent? *Soo-shee soo-shee soo-shee*, there was his answer. He walked along the beach until he was so far away he couldn't even imagine hearing their voices.

He walked until he saw the length of bamboo sticking upright in the sand, waiting for him.

He pulled it free and held it in both hands, savoring the waxy surface against his palms, and memories, memories like waves to a shore flowed

to him as he held this bamboo antenna high: he was a child in Yokohama again, learning Kendo, one hundred repetitions of a downward swing, one hundred strokes he re-enacted now with the bamboo shaft. He forced himself to show the ocean Kendo until he no longer felt shamed by the path his parents and grandparents made backward in time.

While practicing the swing he heard a violent thrashing of water in the shelves along the shore, glimpsed something flailing in a tidepool. He climbed the rock and saw what looked like a black latex porpoise in the pool, man-made, with goggles sewn across the head. Hiro removed his sandals and waded in, hoisting the black body onto the rocks. Arms in the outfit were sealed along either side of the torso, the legs merged into an articulated tail, and not until Hiro pulled the central cord did he encounter evidence of man, the pale face of someone who had just completed three days deep sea patrol. The patrolman struggled his arms free of rubber, then suction released him with a *thwump*, sent him rolling over the rocks, scrabbling on all fours for a moment before he pushed onto his legs.

"I remember how to walk," the man said, surprised.

"You returned to the wrong part of the island," Hiro told him.

"No," said the patrol. "No..."

He looked toward the Pacific as if expecting something to ride in on its dark waves, then gravely said, "I've got to tell the others."

The patrol remembered how to run but did not remember well: he pointed himself one way but his legs veered off another several times splashing him right back into ocean, more fish than man in his first hour returned to shore.

"Damn it! Goddamn it!"

Hiro saw the frustration on his face, the urgency of his delayed task. "This way," he said, "like this," and squatted so the patrol could get on his back.

The island didn't like Hiro carrying the man, the ground became harder against his feet, the trails less compliant. But he ran, the strangely muscled mass of patrolman bouncing against his back.

"What," Hiro panted, "what must you tell the camp?"

"A submersible is heading toward the island."

"A rescue mission?" But he knew better.

"The enemy," said the patrol. "Carson isn't going to like it."

No, Hiro thought. He imagined him holding the Luger in one hand, soaking firelight through his skin as someone told him the Japanese were coming.

Hiro realized he must have taken a wrong turn, they were running a loop. The patrol said, "I'm glad there are no animals on this island — but if there are no animals then what made all these trails?"

The circularity of this question, Hiro thought, must be a comment on running in circles. He vowed not to fail them with another redundant lap and chose a distinctly unfamiliar path. While he was running, huffing, wondering, the patrolman quietly asked, "What do you know about our gadget?"

"Gadget?"

"The bomb we were supposed to drop on Kyoto."

Hiro said nothing because that was exactly how much he knew. He didn't want to know more, didn't want Carson and the others to perceive him as a security threat. His resistance to knowing met the patrol's reluctance to breach secrets and the topic was dropped. But apparently the patrol needed to talk, because he started telling a story, a strange fable or fantasy that didn't help Hiro's concentration. A story of malevolent gods in the New Mexico desert. *Now you are become death, destroyer of worlds*, one god solemnly pronounced. And the sand turned to glass for miles around, and mere mortals were blinded by the event. It was about a fat man and a little boy cursed with power; banished from the desert, they traveled the world looking for someplace to dispel their terrible new energy, but one of them got lost, he had lost his way...

The story had no ending. Or the patrolman had sensed the shift around them and become wary.

Abrupt quiet.

No more insect music, only the movement of plants and trees as the wind shuffled through them, or something.

Hiro sensed a great weight rising behind them. He turned with an underwater slowness and watched a silhouette change geometry as the fuku-ryu rose from its crouch. "Oh!" said a crackling voice in Japanese. "I thought this island was deserted!" Crane-like it lifted a leg of aluminum over the bush and altered configuration: these industrial wonders had walked in lines one thousand long across Pacific isles, New Guinea, the

East Indies, one nation after another falling before their graceful display of outspreading hatches, and Hiro briefly saw past polished barrels and spooled ammunition to the Place of Reverence deep inside its fuselage, where a photo of Emperor Hirohito stared out at him.

"Get moving," said the patrol, digging his heels, "run; run!"

Hiro ran, heard the fuku-ryu change gears and begin its balletic pursuit. The guns started firing, counterpoints to the long-legged strides. Vegetation succumbed to its advance, exploding alongside them and Hiro knew he couldn't avoid a similar demise, couldn't outlast a machine whose piston soul fed on recoil. He sprinted toward a fork in the trail.

"We must separate," he said.

"What — "

"Two targets, left and right."

"Left and — ?"

"Right!"

They disengaged, the patrolman hit the ground running. Hiro went left, the other right, a palm tree between them slid to the ground as gunfire passed through it.

"Warn the others!" the patrol shouted through the trees.

"Yes," Hiro said.

The fuku-ryu chose the other path.

"You've got to tell them!"

Yes. The machine picked up speed. He could see its metal surfaces flash through the trees while the patrolman sank into darkness. Could anything outrun such malice? Could Hiro? His only advantage was knowing these trails and hoping they would delay the fuku-ryu.

He ran, he ran. He circled the island, went the long way around; he felt like he was running the outside track of a phonograph record and started to wonder if the camp could have ceased to exist. Then the stink of burned fish brought it back, slices of plane staggered over rock, smears of orange blaze surrounded by dancing silhouettes.

Dancing silhouettes? Hiro stopped.

The men had no reason to celebrate, not unless they'd found some way to get drunk.... The revelry unsettled him. Hiro was reluctant to go further, but they had a real enemy now, and he a duty to warn his fellow soldiers.

A ring of orange bodies surged around the fire, shirts off, smeared with dirt, hyena faces. One man with a blindfold was made to spin round and round, the rest counting off rotations until he was so dizzy he could barely stand. They thrust a stick in his hands and pushed him toward a tree where they'd hung a silk body, an effigy stitched together from parachute silk — an effigy, Hiro saw, of himself. Buck teeth, slanted eyes. They'd pissed on it to yellow the skin. The effigy was everyone in Japan, and it was him. His fellow soldiers laughed like drunk Mexicans as they shoved their pig in the middle and encouraged dizzy swings at this makeshift piñata.

Hiro pushed through the circle. Some had seen him coming and the laughter tapered off. When he moved to the center, his battered image swinging before him, all fell silent. Orange faces of delight suspended to wide-eyed stares.

"We were going to destroy a city," Hiro said.

There was no response.

"Our bomb," he said. The blindfolded man walloped the effigy, and its swing pitched shadows across Hiro's face, light and dark, light and dark. The patrolman's story returned to him, no longer an elliptical fantasy. Now he understood.

"Our bomb was going to kill all living things. For miles, every civilian in Kyoto. Every mother, every newborn child. Death."

They said nothing. Was their silence shame? Or disbelief? Some of them knew everything about the weapon: secrets had been shared more freely here. *They knew*, Hiro decided, and struggled to say something that would hurt them.

"The bomb is now property of the Japanese Army."

One of the lieutenants managed to pipe up. Excuse me? What?!

"A Japanese probe has come to the island. It saw our deep sea patrol and me. It killed him, I am sure. It will kill us all, and claim our secret bomb in the Emperor's name."

The men made noises of protest — not without a fight they sure's hell won't — but Hiro shoved the pig with his blindfolded swings and spoke through their banter.

"There is no time for a fight. We must keep the weapon from falling into Japanese hands. If its technology becomes available to the Imperial Army, the war in the Pacific is lost."

"So what are we supposed to do?"

For a moment the question lingered, then Hiro pushed through them, up the darkened hillside. He sensed more than saw that they followed, someone even pulling along the blindfolded man by his stick. Hiro walked determinedly through the string of fires. The biggest segment of bomber rose before him.

Carson sat atop, watching. In his lap was the blackened head of the dolphin. As Hiro and the others gathered before him he hurled it into a fire, hard, sparks.

"What do you ladies want?"

"The bomb doors," Hiro said. "We must open them."

Carson sneered. "We've been through this already."

"The Japanese are here. On the island."

"You're the Japanese," he spat.

"We must prevent the Imperial Army from taking the bomb. We can't keep them away. So it must be destroyed."

Carson stared, his eyes twin bonfires — the candles had again been lit. Hiro watched the man put his hand inside his flight uniform. "Okay," he said. "I can oblige you there."

The other soldiers exchanged looks of surprise. Hiro knew not to trust the man, especially now that he seemed to be smiling.

"You see," Carson went on, "I'm prepared for just such an eventuality. Someone has to be. What I got here are instructions for preventing the enemy from acquiring our gadget. The only foolproof way of doing so."

"Which is what?" asked one of the lieutenants.

"Detonation."

The soldiers made noises of consideration. Now Hiro had a sense of how many knew and how many did not know the ramifications of the gadget by the proportion saying things like *Great idea!* to those who remained stony in silence.

"It will kill us all," Hiro said.

"That's enough!" Carson barked. "What the fuck do you know?! You don't know the bomb's yield, you don't know how long we got to take cover — far as I'm concerned you're an agent of the Japs and ought to consider yourself under arrest."

"Anyone here who knows the weapon and thinks we can survive its detonation," Hiro said, "please speak now."

Quiet.

"Well, I'm proceeding," said Carson. "This is military business. It's protocol. It don't matter if you been suckered by this slant." He slid off the fuselage, the sheet of instruction flapping in his hand like a flag. "I won't let the Japs take the bomb."

"Excuse me, son."

All eyes turned to the back of the crowd. It was Sergeant Hellerman, speaking up at last.

"I believe I got rank here," he said. "And I want another opinion before you go blowing anything sky high."

Hiro didn't even see Carson draw the Luger, just heard the blunt bang of the shot that stopped Hellerman, dropped him, blood running from his forehead like wine from a broken cask.

Carson pumped another shell, turning to Hiro. "Now who's going to hold the little Jap still for me?"

The little Jap had yanked the stick away from the blindfolded man. Hiro took it in both hands like mock swords of his past; he smacked it sharply against Carson's hand. The gun sailed from his grip and landed in a nearby fire.

Hiro took a defensive stance.

Carson flexed his struck hand, his face lit with a smile of reflected fire: Hiro had lived up to expectations. Carson reached to his boot and drew a bayonet. He sank to a knife-fighter's crouch and pointed the bayonet at Hiro's belly. Through the unpleasant display of teeth he said, "I've dreamed of doing this to you."

But Hiro too had had dreams, moonlit beach dreams that stung of soo-shee, soo-shee, soo-shee, dreams stretching back into his ancestry and reaching over the Pacific, as he showed Kendo all the way to Japan, his reflection rippling over the ocean as he brought his sword down and connected with land, too far away to see but not to feel through the handle. *Crack*. It split in his hands, the stick. At the opposite end Carson continued to stare at him even though his eyes were no longer level. His face had become asymmetrical beneath the blow Hiro crowned on him. He pulled away his broken sword and Carson fell

forward, convulsing against the ground until his body overpowered his spirit.

"The doors," Hiro said.

They assailed the compartment with more determination than before, more sense, levers and engineering at last forcing the hatch open.

A skeleton peered out at them. A skeleton, or the bombardier, emaciated by his stay inside. His hair had gone strangely white. He pulled his rack of bones over the opening and Hiro thought he heard a dry clatter when the man landed on the ground. "You okay?" someone asked. The bombardier brushed away helping hands. He ignored questions, statements, puzzled stares. As soon as he steadied himself he walked into the forest and they watched the dark eat away his white figure. "Where you going?" someone shouted.

Apple pie, they heard him say.

He was gone.

Attention returned to the open compartment. Firelight revealed the bomb but Hiro had difficulty accepting what he saw: it looked like some swollen prototype of a submarine — *huge*. So much bigger than he'd imagined; the possibility of dragging it from this site fizzled in him like a firework landing in a cloud. He stared at messages scrawled over its surface. Take this, Japs! This is for the boys of 141st Armored! Remember Pearl Harbor!

"Can it be..."

"Disarmed?" said one of the soldiers. "I don't know. I doubt we have the tools or the knowhow. Maybe if the bombardier helped. He knows his stuff."

"The bombardier I think is lost to us," said Hiro.

"Me and Bock can try pulling out the physics package. We can try."

But could they do so before the fuku-ryu attacked? Hiro wished he could somehow help as he watched the men climb a service ladder and unbolt a hatch at the bomb's apex. "Can you explain to me its operation?" They told him, or tried to, their simplified description echoing from the hole they'd climbed down. An inner sphere made of countless explosive charges would create an implosion. An unusual and rare material would be compressed, this compression causing a fundamental change in its nature, and a great release of energy, which was another way of saying

explosion.... A vague understanding made the impact no less frightening. The only question now, it seemed, was which citizens would be vaporized by the great release — those who fell under the hateful wrath of Axis or Allied commanders?

As they listened to the pair work, inside Hiro and the others stared at the jungle. Some held sticks or rocks, prepared to put up a hopeless fight. Hiro wondered why the fuku-ryu was waiting so long to kill them.

Then one of the men came up from the shoreline, in tears.

"What is the matter?"

It was the second battling lieutenant; he had seen some action on other fronts of the Pacific campaign, in losing efforts spaced over the Marianas. He spoke of the Japanese cunning with no regard for Hiro's ancestry, describing a variety of phonographic box that Japanese agents had placed near U.S. camps. The boxes remained inconspicuous until certain lonely hours of the night, when they would play music, popular hits from back home, maybe *Shoo Shoo Baby* or *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*.

"Those poor dumb jarheads would hear that tune and forget themselves, dancing away from camp, doing the foxtrot or jitterbug past the perimeter into the jungle. When they get close enough — bang! The box explodes, blowing the poor homesick bugger to kingdom come."

He wiped away a tear.

"Terrible thing to do to a piece of music," the lieutenant said. "When this is over, you think we'll ever be able to listen to tunes the same way?" He shook his head. "We'll dive for cover every time we hear *Chattanooga Choo Choo*."

The anecdote made little sense to Hiro until he listened past the man's words and heard music. Music, voices, a song. He took a few steps in the direction of the beach. Others stopped to listen to the melody pulsing in with the waves; to them it must have seemed nothing more than beautiful nonsense.

"Take cover," Hiro said. "Something is wrong."

Some jumped for hiding places, others kicked dirt into the orange glow of the nearest fire. Work on the bomb continued, while the sniffing lieutenant followed Hiro to a vantage overlooking the beach, closer to the source of music.

"What's it called?" the lieutenant asked. "I want to know the name of the song that kills me."

"The Japanese anthem."

Hiro wondered how many people would be required to sing in unison and be heard over an ocean? Could waves carry an anthem, if it was given proper voice? But through these thoughts pushed a more compelling image. The fuku-ryu after it spotted him, transmitting radio pulses to a floating naval base, a request for an expeditionary team, and the Kaitana responding, six of them lining along the deck then diving one by one into the ocean.

Now they had arrived. Hiro could make out six heads above the waterline, joined in proud song as they walked ashore. The Kaitana rose from the water wearing only breech cloths and perfumed oils. On the shore they kneeled and bowed, touching their heads to the sand. A tortoiselike mechanical waddled after them, issuing a neat package to each.

"Can't they see the camp?" said the lieutenant. "They must be able to see our fires."

"Yes," Hiro said. "I'm sure they can."

"Then why are they just sitting there?"

"Meditation. Next comes the ceremony of putting on uniforms. We will have a few minutes before they choose to engage us."

He and the lieutenant fell back, Hiro walking to the effigy and carefully untying it from its branch. He took off his uniform and threw it onto the blaze with the dummy. The other soldiers jumped when he returned; they were waiting for an oriental attack, Hiro realized, and without his uniform or the stars and bars, he was as frightening a sight as his former countrymen on the shore.

He threw down the rope.

"Tie me up," he said. "Tie my hands to my ankles."

"Why?"

"Like you mean it. As if I was the dummy you hung from the tree."

The lieutenant hesitated, then began wrapping the rope according to Hiro's instructions. When the knots were completed Hiro fell to his side, rubbing face and hair into the dirt. He said to the men working on the bomb, "Have you done enough to make it a mystery?"

"No," came the reply. "No. Not for the Japs. They'll be able to figure out what this is. Maybe a few weeks, maybe a month. The more we pull out the longer it'll take them to get a complete understanding."

"They're sitting up!" someone shouted. "They're getting ready!"

"I think you should take any components you have," Hiro said. "Run with them. Go. Run as far away as the island will allow and if you have a chance throw them into the ocean."

"What about you?"

"Do it now. They will be here soon. And the only thing the Kaitana dislike more than Japanese prisoners who haven't committed seppuku are their captors."

He was facing away from the bomb so he didn't see them pick up the pieces, but he did watch each soldier file past him with a sober expression, as if going to receive communion wafer, then heard the rustle of leaves as each sank into the island wild. He listened. He listened until he heard nothing more but the spit and crackle of bonfires, and knew he was alone here lying in the dirt. Alone between the Kaitana and the bomb. He watched the flames. He could see nothing else. He imagined the swordsmen completing their ceremony and falling into stride as they marched up the hillside; when they actually rose before him it was as if they'd been summoned from the depths of his mind.

They looked not unlike combatants from the mechanized Kendo matches put on in Tokyo gambling parlors; black skirts and black leather cuirasses, articulated armor that transformed their oriental physiques to something wasplike and potent. Every movement of the suits deferred to the swords and lacquered ceremonial rifles fastened onto their backs. The outfits tapered into helmets screened by slats of steel, revealing only narrow stripes of flesh and jewel-black eyes.

Staring at Hiro on the ground. And the exposed bomb behind him. Then back to Hiro.

The biggest of the Kaitana squatted near his head.

"Why haven't you taken your life?" he asked in polite Japanese.

"I had no gun. The Americans captured me during my attempt to run off a cliff. Please pardon me. Would someone do the honor of removing my head?"

The Kaitana drew his sword, a bright flash of moonlight and fire, the

sword rumored to have taken down armored vehicles. Instead of Hiro's neck he slid it against the bindings, cutting him loose. Hiro pretended to rub sore wrists and ankles before staggering to his feet.

"You must be happy to see us."

Hiro nodded.

"How long have you been prisoner?"

"Six days. My zero crashed into the ocean. Shot down by Americans."

"Where are they now?"

"They ran when they saw you coming. Scattered. I don't know to where."

"It would be useful to have one of them alive." He pointed his sword at the bomb, then gave instructions that one U.S. soldier must be taken for explanation.

"Several times I heard them speaking in negative terms about a demon," Hiro said.

The Kaitana looked at him.

"Only slowly did I realize they were referring to this bomb."

"What did they say?"

"They cursed it for making their plane crash. The more knowledgeable ones commented on the crudity of its design; that it was more dangerous for those transporting it than the intended victims. They called it a last ditch effort against the Japanese. So wicked was the spirit surrounding the bomb that it often moved them to disputes, and you can see for yourself the results." He indicated the bodies of Carson and Sergeant Hellerman.

"It was the only thing they spoke of worse than me," he added.

"Curious they should attempt to deliver the bomb if it's so crude," said the Kaitana leader. "I suppose we will have to leave that puzzle to the scientists aboard Base Shiroyama."

He gave orders to prepare the bomb for transport.

Wait, said Hiro.

"Maybe we should leave it here," he continued, and attempted eye contact with each of the Kaitana. "Perhaps this weapon was not meant to ride the sky or be dropped, anywhere. The American plane was not shot down; the hand of fate knocked it to the ground. Fate, like a divine wind, sending its message. If this bomb is as terrible to the people who wield it

as those it destroys, perhaps no better place for it than a deserted rock in the Pacific."

The Kaitana paused. They stared at the open hatch and the huge dull surface of the bomb. They had all heard him, but only the leader responded.

He raised his sword and pressed the tip against Hiro's neck.

"If you have a weapon at your disposal," he said, "it only makes sense to use it." He summoned the fuku-ryu to come assist transportation of the bomb.

The jungle exploded open, the fuku-ryu thundering forward on its long legs. Surprised by its lack of delicacy, the Kaitana stepped back, avoiding its haphazard trajectory. They were more surprised when it opened gun hatches and wheeled its cannons on them. Gunshots took the commander in the chest. The other Kaitana drew their swords and attacked the rebelling machine. Hiro took the opportunity to fall away, and in the background he glimpsed a halo of white hair.

The bombardier. He must have had a hand in the fuku-ryu's mechanics to create such a violent diversion.

"Go!" the man shouted at Hiro. "Go!"

The bombardier left his shadowy hiding place and ran through the *melée*, leaping back into the compartment that had imprisoned him. He jumped to the bomb's service ladder. Hiro had no idea what the man was doing: he sang one of his songs as he climbed, something about hamburgers or Coney Island frankfurters, Hiro couldn't be sure. Seeing the bombardier, one of the Kaitana broke from the battle, bringing his sword around in a powerful arc. Hiro reached into the bonfire where the Luger lay white as coals: it still worked, the shot not penetrating the swordsman's armor but knocking him off his feet. The bombardier scrambled up the ladder and dropped into the bomb, one more word echoing up from its depths.

Go!

Hiro looked around. Go where?

And then he saw it.

Do you even know how to swim? he asked himself, but there was no time to wonder, because he was already running down the hillside, down the beach, splashing into the water, he was diving...

Beneath the waterline was an even stranger sight than those he had so far witnessed. The patrolman, somehow still alive. He was in his deep sea diving suit and beckoning Hiro onward. He didn't understand how the man could have survived the fuku-ryu, and wondered if what he saw wasn't the patrolman at all but a black dolphin. Whatever the case Hiro could not keep up with the strange entity swimming circles around him or remain underwater with such ease. He surfaced briefly to look back at the fires that tinged the face of the island. Then he dove again, deeper, down to where the black dolphin beckoned him, and suddenly the water was flooded by light, light pouring after him, lighting the depths of the Pacific like an underwater sun, and Hiro swam deeper into the strange new world the detonation of the bomb had suddenly illuminated around him. ॐ

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Next month we'll be featuring a dark vision of suburbia by the author of such books as *On Boxing*, *Them*, *Man Crazy*, and *We Were the Mulvaney's*—Joyce Carol Oates. "Feral" depicts one incident at a swimming pool and shows how it alters forever the life of one boy. We're delighted to have Ms. Oates's work gracing our pages.

We'll also be featuring a gorgeous new space adventure by R. Garcia y Robertson, "A Princess of Helium," and Howard Waldrop will send us in search of a strange show from the early days of television. And do you think you can spot a real Harlan Ellison story when you see it? Next month we'll put you to the test.

We'll also have more of Gregory Benford's efforts at sending a message into space, Douglas E. Winter and Charles de Lint on books, and the ubiquitous Much Much More.

Of course our big Anniversary issue is just around the corner too, with new stories from the likes of Tanith Lee, Robert Sheckley, Rachel Pollack, and Avram Davidson. Check out our new Web site at www.fsfmag.com for sneak previews or if you want to subscribe. We think you'll like what's coming.

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CURIOSITIES

DR. ARNOLDI, BY TIFFANY THAYER, 1934

I READ *Dr. Arnoldi* for the last time when I was fifteen.

Why for the last time? I found the book absolutely fascinating — and disgusting. I read it as I then read most science-fantasy works, in stand-up sessions in my neighborhood rental-library bookstore.

If I found it at all fascinating, why haven't I bought a copy to reread? Well, first you get online and try to order something by Thayer. Tiffany who? Thayer (1902-1959), rather famous in the 1930s for his brilliantly ironic *Thirteen Men*, Thayer, the great publicist of Charles Fort — Thayer today resides in literature's limbo.

And there are those alive today who've also read *Dr. Arnoldi*, who say that's exactly what the s.o.b. deserves. You see, it's a novel that deals only with death. Or rather, with the upsetting absence of death.

For some reason, never explained, death has stopped. Nobody can die anymore. There's a very

dear little scene, for instance, in an execution chamber where a condemned man, electrocuted to no avail several dozen times, is — out of sheer judicial desperation — chopped up and then ground into human hamburger. The pile of hamburger goes on pulsating, utterly undead.

Sex? There's lots in the book, for sex never takes a single holiday. Humanity keeps expanding over every square inch of earth, down to the unlit bottoms of the sea, up to the thinnest level of the stratosphere, humanity without end, chewing on itself. Thayer ends the novel with an understandable plea to every deity from Adonis to Zeus, "If you ever get an idea as good as this again, give it to Ernest Hemingway or Fanny Hurst or Sinclair Lewis, but please, please don't ever give it to me."

That's the way I feel about the book I read so many years ago. If you find a copy, give it to some sf fan you dislike and observe the baffled misery in his eyes after he's read it.

—William Tenn

SPECULATIONS

DECLINING LITERACY WILL DRIVE THE
PROLIFERATION OF PICTOGRAPHS.



OVER TIME, PICTOGRAPHS WILL SUCCUMB
TO THE SHORTHAND OF ABSTRACTION...



...REINVIGORATING LITERACY.

hong

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But when he challenges the treacherous rulers
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